

THE EARLY HISTORY OF STEAMBOATING ON THE MINNESOTA RIVER¹

The history of steamboating on the Minnesota River extends over a period of seventy-five years, but its actual commercial significance covers less than two decades. From 1823 to 1851 an occasional excursion or tramp voyage to a trading post was made. These were few in number and until 1850 boats seldom ascended the river any great distance. In that year the trips of the steamboats "Anthony Wayne," "Nominee," and "Yankee" demonstrated the practicability of navigating the waters of the Minnesota, and the following year the treaty of Traverse des Sioux opened up the greater part of the Minnesota Valley, ushering in an era of steamboating the phenomenal growth of which was paralleled only by its equally astonishing decline. Cut-throat competition, the uncertain and limited season of navigation, and the completion of a railroad through the Minnesota Valley all combined to bring about the ultimate disappearance of steamboats on the Minnesota River. From 1872 to the close of the century fewer steamboats plied the waters of the Minnesota than had arrived at such ports as Henderson, St. Peter, Mankato, or even Fort Ridgely in a single week during the heyday of navigation.²

Although steamboating on the Minnesota was given its initial impetus largely by the excursions of 1850 and the resultant advertising, other steamboats had ascended the stream earlier. The "Virginia," the first steamboat to navigate the waters of the upper Mississippi, entered the mouth of the Min-

¹ A paper read on June 15, 1929, at the Hutchinson session of the eighth state historical convention. *Ed.*

² *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), July 25, 1850; Thomas Hughes, "History of Steamboating on the Minnesota River," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 134-158 (part 1).

nesota on May 10 and again on June 20, 1823. Late in the fall of the same year the "Rambler" made a flying trip to Fort Snelling and shared honors with the "Virginia" by nosing its way into the mouth of the Minnesota River.³

The "Rufus Putnam," commanded by Captain David Bates, arrived at Fort Snelling for the first time on April 4, 1825. Four weeks later it returned, carrying goods for the Columbia Fur Company's post at Land's End, about a mile above the fort on the Minnesota.⁴ This trip, the first ascent of the Minnesota River above its mouth by a steamboat, heads the long list of voyages that constitute the history of steamboating on that river.

Other craft must have followed the "Rufus Putnam" in the years immediately after 1825, but the next recorded trip that has been discovered is that of 1836. Late in May of that year, the "Palmyra," in command of George B. Cole, took a large party of excursionists to St. Peter's and the Falls of St. Anthony.⁵ A number of men and women from Galena and the adjoining lead district were among the passengers. A journal kept by one of the excursionists tells of a short foray that the boat made up the Minnesota:

At sunset our party went on board the boat, together with the officers and ladies of the garrison. The boat ascended the St. Petre's [*sic*] river about three miles. This is probably the first

³ William J. Petersen, "The 'Virginia,' the 'Clermont' of the Upper Mississippi," *ante*, 9: 352, 361; *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), September 3, 1823.

⁴ Edward D. Neill, "Occurrences in and Around Fort Snelling, from 1819 to 1840," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 2: 110.

⁵ The "Palmyra" was owned by Cole, John and George W. Atchinson of Galena, and the firm of Hempstead and Beebe of St. Louis. It was a new boat, built at Pittsburgh early in 1836; it was 129 feet by 17 feet 4 inches, had a 5 foot hold, and was of 101 tons' burden. It had a transom stern, a cabin above deck, and a plain figurehead. In size and general construction, the "Palmyra" is typical of the steamboats of the period. The official record of the boat is in a volume of enrollments at the port of Pittsburgh, 1835-39, in the customs office at Pittsburgh.

steamboat that ever ascended thus far up this river. It is a beautiful stream, with clean prairie banks, and clear of bushes. Two miles from its mouth we pass a Sioux village. Having once more returned to the landing near the Fort, we bade adieu to the gentlemen and ladies of the garrison and dropped down to the American Fur Company's establishment.⁶

On a beautiful morning in June, 1842, a large pleasure party left Fort Snelling by steamboat and ascended the river as far as Shakopee's village. Extensive preparations had been made for the voyage, the passengers contributing liberally of bread, cakes, pies, coffee, sugar, milk, and cream and a varied assortment of cold meats. The young men, fearful lest some of the ladies might become sea-sick, brought on board an abundant supply of champagne and old cognac. As the boat was about to start Shakopee and two of his warriors hastened down the bank, the former gesticulating frantically, presumably at somebody on board. When he reached the boat he made it clear that his business had been concluded and that he would like to accompany the excursionists. His wish was granted and the merry party began the trip upstream. After several hours spent in enjoying the scenery the hungry excursionists repaired to the cabin, where the famished Shakopee quickly joined them. In order to put a stop to his eternal hand-shaking the tourists had huge quantities of food placed before him. "How he seemed to enjoy a piece of cake," writes one, "that had accidentally dropped into the oyster-soup! and with equal gravity would he eat apple-pie and ham together. And then his cry of 'wakun' [*mysterious*] when the cork flew from the champagne bottle across the table!"

When Shakopee's village was reached the great chief was told by Colonel Greenleaf Dearborn, a member of the party, that the excursion had been expressly made to his village as a

⁶ *Northwestern Gazette and Galena Advertiser*, July 30, 1836. Other installments of the account of the voyage from Galena to Fort Snelling and return appear in the issues for June 18 and July 2. A file of the *Advertiser* is in the office of the *Galena Gazette* at Galena, Illinois.

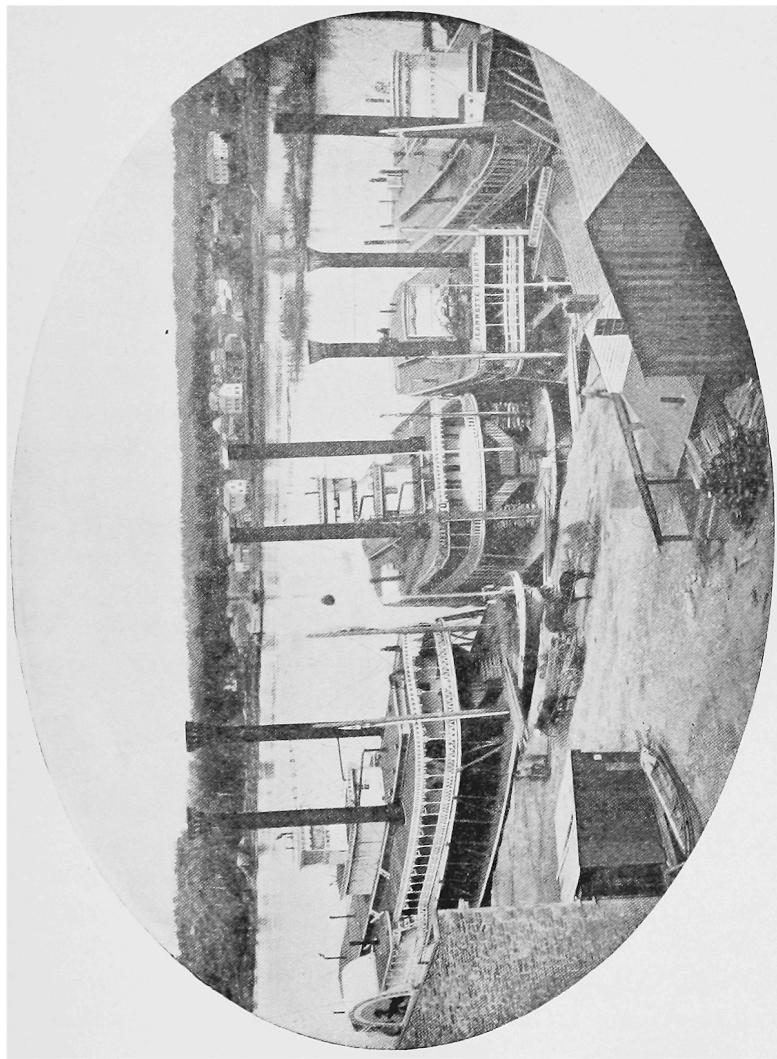
mark of respect and admiration for him. This compliment greatly pleased the gullible Shakopee, who immediately sprang ashore and informed his assembled tribesmen of the high honor that had been bestowed upon him, expatiating at length on the good qualities and attributes of the white man. After such an oration as the emotional Shakopee alone was able to make, the steamboat swung downstream.⁷

Perhaps as a result of such trips as those just described, the *Boston Atlas* published a statement in 1847 to the effect that the Minnesota River was navigable by steamboat to the foot of the first rapids near Carver and that but little improvement would be necessary to make it navigable for more than a hundred and fifty miles above its mouth. This was reprinted in the Galena papers, and during the next two years the increased commerce between Galena and the territory around Fort Snelling was noted with genuine satisfaction by the business men and newspaper editors of that thriving town.⁸

If the merry excursionists on board the "Anthony Wayne," the "Nominee," and the "Yankee" in 1850 had been given to musing they might have reflected that just a century and a half had elapsed since Le Sueur — probably the first white man to navigate and explore the waters of the Minnesota — had turned the bow of his tiny felucca up the winding river. It is doubtful, however, if even a fleeting thought was given to this historic event. Captain Daniel Able of the "Anthony Wayne" was no

⁷ Mrs. Mary Eastman, *Dahcotah; or, Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling*, 113-116 (New York, 1849).

⁸ E. B. Washburne to Elias H. Derby, August 31, 1847, reprinted from *Boston Atlas* in *Galena Semi-weekly Advertiser*, October 5, 1847. According to the same issue of the *Advertiser*, three boats had been regularly engaged in commerce on the upper Mississippi since 1843. To this number must be added the many transient boats that engaged in the trade. In 1843 twenty-six boats left Galena for the upper Mississippi, and in 1844 this number had increased to forty-one. A writer for the *Weekly Northwestern Gazette* (Galena) of November 23, 1849, expressed delight over the fact that the up-river trade was organized.



MISSISSIPPI AND MINNESOTA RIVER STEAMBOATS AT
THE ST. PAUL LEVEE ABOUT 1858

[From a photograph in the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society. The boats are, from left to right, the "Grey Eagle," the "Frank Steele," the "Jeannette Roberts," and the "Time and Tide." The three latter were used on the Minnesota River.]

doubt intent on making a new record, and the little time that was not devoted to the passengers on his short run to the foot of the rapids above Carver, was perhaps given to counting out the profits of the voyage. A short time later the "Nominee" went up still higher. On July 18 the "Anthony Wayne" left St. Paul to retrieve its laurels, and navigated the Minnesota River to a point a few miles below Mankato.⁹

Stimulated by these successes and hopeful of securing some of the publicity that the "Anthony Wayne" and the "Nominee" had gained throughout the Mississippi Valley, Captain Martin K. Harris left St. Paul on July 22 with his "Yankee," determined to surpass the feats of both boats. On the second day he passed Traverse des Sioux, and that night a moonlight dance was held on the grassy banks at the upper end of Kasota Prairie. After passing the sign that marked the point reached by the "Anthony Wayne," the "Yankee" proceeded upstream to a point a little above the present village of Judson in Blue Earth County. Here Captain Harris decided to turn back, since the warm weather and swarms of mosquitoes were proving too much for the adventurous excursionists. The exploits of the "Anthony Wayne," "Nominee," and "Yankee" were heralded throughout the Mississippi Valley as marking a new era in steamboating on the upper waters of the Mississippi.¹⁰

Although the excursions of 1850 demonstrated the navigability of the Minnesota River, it remained for the treaty of Traverse des Sioux in the following year to throw the valley open to white settlement. While the stage was being set by politicians and land speculators for the successful negotiation of this treaty, preparations for a significant event were being

⁹ *Pioneer*, July 4, 25, August 1, 1850.

¹⁰ *Pioneer*, August 15, 1850; *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), July 8, 1851. The *Northwestern Gazette* for June 28, July 19, and August 2, 1850, carried full accounts of the trips of the three boats, with optimistic editorial comment on the future value of their exploits to Galena.

made hundreds of miles away. In St. Joseph County, Michigan, lies the little town of Mottville, comfortably situated on the banks of the St. Joseph River. Here in 1850 dwelt Franklin Wasson and Henry Barnes, two energetic Yankees. Seized with the western fever and chafed, no doubt, by their proximity to civilization, Wasson and Barnes determined to move to the frontier. They chose St. Paul as their future home. Perhaps the excursions of 1850 and the future prospects of Minnesota had fired the imaginations of the two sturdy Yankees. They experienced no difficulty in enlisting in their venture about sixty people. During the winter of 1850-51 they built a sidewheel steamboat on the banks of the St. Joseph River and named it the "Dakotah." The boat was 125 feet long with a 25 foot beam, measured 160 tons, and drew only 2 feet of water. In order to reach Lake Michigan the "Dakotah" had to proceed southward down the St. Joseph River, passing through Elkhart and South Bend, Indiana, en route, then turn northward through Niles, Michigan, and enter the lake at St. Joseph, a distance of fully sixty miles. When spring came Wasson and Barnes with their party set out, reached the mouth of the St. Joseph, made their hazardous way around the southern part of Lake Michigan, and arrived at Chicago without mishap. After leaving Chicago, the "Dakotah" proceeded in leisurely fashion down the Illinois Canal. The guards and wheels of the boat had been constructed so that they could be removed and thus allow the craft to pass through the canal without difficulty. These, it was intended, would be replaced at Peru, Illinois, and the "Dakotah" would then be ready to proceed down the Illinois and up the Mississippi to St. Paul. One of the partners, Wasson, left the craft at Peru, went overland to Galena, and arrived at St. Paul on July 5 on board the "Dr. Franklin No. 1." He selected a site for a foundry, which he and Barnes intended to establish, busied himself securing stone for a foundation, and awaited impatiently the arrival of the boat, which he planned to fit out and enter into the Minnesota River trade.

Two weeks passed and the "Dakotah" failed to appear. Thoroughly alarmed by the long delay, Wasson finally went down the river to solve the mystery.

While St. Paul was congratulating itself on the prospective acquisition of a new and much needed industry, the "Dakotah" dropped down to Peoria. Here boiler trouble developed and it was necessary to wait three weeks while a new boiler was shipped from Chicago and installed. The work done, on August 9 the "Dakotah" rounded to for the purpose of wooding up and testing the new boiler. Suddenly it burst. According to one account the explosion was so terrific that the boat sank instantly in eleven feet of water. Three bodies were recovered and seventeen people, dreadfully scalded or otherwise wounded, were brought ashore. Barnes was among the latter and his wounds were so severe that he died soon afterwards. Thus was lost to the Minnesota River the "Dakotah," the first steamboat expressly built for that trade. If the pioneer craft had been fit to proceed from Peoria without delay, it might have arrived at St. Paul and steamed up the Minnesota River to Traverse des Sioux in time for the signing of the treaty.¹¹

It required more than a steamboat explosion, however, to dampen the ardor of the restless land-seeker. At St. Anthony before the end of the summer of 1851 it was said that ten new first-class steamboats would be put on the upper Mississippi in 1852 if the Sioux treaty were ratified. Galena merchants prophesied that three boats a week would be necessary during 1852 and that daily service would be im-

¹¹ *Minnesota Democrat*, July 8, 15, August 19, 26, September 23, November 18, 1851. Chicago and Peoria dispatches differ regarding the place where the "Dakotah" was built, the former giving Mottville and the latter Sturgis, a town farther from Lake Michigan than Mottville and fully five miles from the St. Joseph River. Since Mottville is on the banks of this river, in all likelihood the steamboat was built there. There is also much variation in different newspaper accounts regarding the number of families and people involved.

perative in 1853 to carry the hordes of emigrants, the pleasure seekers, and the increased freight that Indian annuities and a growing population would require. In three trips to St. Paul late in the season of 1851 one boat, the "Nominee," carried more than six hundred passengers, while her lower decks creaked and groaned under heavy loads of live stock, agricultural implements, and merchandise. About the same time the "Excelsior" arrived with her cabin and decks jammed with immigrants. The "Nominee" had left a generous tribute of passengers and cargoes along the way. Galena merchants pointed with enthusiasm to the St. Paul trade, which, by 1855, amounted to \$102,000 for flour, corn, oats, and pork for the season.¹² Not to be outstripped by Galena, in 1851 the merchants of Dubuque purchased the steamboat "Tiger" to engage in the up-river trade and promised to enter a larger boat in the commerce with St. Paul directly. The "Tiger" arrived at the latter place on May 22 and brought a full freight of grain, lime, and other articles on June 5. Although it was a small boat, the *Democrat* declared, the "Tiger" did not mean "to be growled off the track by snorting water-lions of Galena."¹³ During the fifties St. Louis, Cincinnati, and even far-away, grimy Pittsburgh sent immense cargoes of freight and passengers to St. Paul and the towns of the Minnesota Valley.¹⁴

Just as Galena served as an entrepôt for Minnesota, so St. Paul played a like rôle in supplying the needs of Shakopee, Chaska, Henderson, St. Peter, Mankato, and points beyond. As early as 1853 St. Paul was exhibiting evidences of its future supremacy in commercial matters. In that year \$390,000 was invested in merchandise at St. Paul, including goods to arrive by steamboat early in spring. This was divided

¹² *Minnesota Democrat*, August 12, 19, September 23, 30, October 7, 1851; *Shakopee Independent*, January 30, 1856.

¹³ *Minnesota Democrat*, May 27, June 10, 1851.

¹⁴ *Pioneer*, December 9, 1852; *Daily Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), June 1, 1857.

as follows: dry goods, \$100,000; groceries, \$83,000; assorted merchandise, \$100,000; clothing, hats, caps, and the like, \$30,000; boots and shoes, \$10,000; hardware, \$5,000; farm implements, \$8,000; books and stationery, \$12,000; drugs, paints, oil, and glass, \$12,000; iron and nails, \$20,000; miscellaneous items, \$10,000. To this must be added \$400,000 invested in the Indian trade and government contracts, for which St. Paul served as the center and distributing point. The commission business transacted in 1852 at the three or four warehouses on the city's two steamboat landings amounted to approximately fifty thousand dollars, and it was expected that this would be more than quadrupled in the next year.¹⁵

Continued low water in the years following the signing of the treaty of Traverse des Sioux greatly retarded the growth of steamboating. After the usual spring floods the Minnesota River would suddenly dry up and, notwithstanding the efforts of steamboats to rub their bellies over the innumerable sandbars that blocked the way, only a few score trips were made each season.¹⁶ Immigrants were surging into the valley, however, and despite this temporary handicap the general aspect of the country was changing fast. An optimistic outlook was expressed by Martin McLeod after a trip up the meandering Minnesota on the steamboat "Black Hawk":

Cabins going up everywhere. Hundreds of claims on each bank from Mendota to the Blue Earth — and onwards to the Cottonwood, which is now being explored for Coal, with no small certainty of success. If the present fever does not intermit, there will be employment for at least three boats, continually, during the ensuing season. The pilots and others of the initiated craft say that the Minnesota is an excellent stream to navigate — better than any other tributary of the Mississippi above the Ohio — as far as Traverse des Sioux — beyond there are some snag obstructions,

¹⁵ *Weekly Minnesotian*, April 2, 1853.

¹⁶ Hughes, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 158. The *Pioneer* of August 12, 1852, reports that at that time freight rates were much higher than usual because of the low water.

but they can be cleared out at a trifling expense. I never was so sanguine as many others of the rapid settlement of this Territory, but latterly I have become quite a convert.

Despite this forecast, scarcely a hundred arrivals from the Minnesota River were chronicled at the St. Paul levee in the five years ending in 1854.¹⁷

The growth of the valley towns was slow but substantial in the period prior to 1855. In that year, however, there were 109 steamboat arrivals at St. Paul from the Minnesota. In 1856 there were 207, in 1857 the local wharfmaster registered 292, and in 1858 a total of 394 steamboats docked at the St. Paul levee from the valley towns.¹⁸ Shakopee, Chaska, Henderson, St. Peter, Mankato, and other points along the Minnesota River became distributing centers for the inland settlements, and as quickly as the tons of freight were dumped upon their levees they were carted away into the interior. It was largely through this service that the fast-growing towns in the Big Woods received their supplies.

Intense rivalry existed among the various river towns. Each "pointed with pride" to its own rapid growth and usually "viewed with alarm" or derision the progress of its neighbor. In pointing out the peculiarly strategic geographic position of Henderson, a writer for the local newspaper remarked:

The business of the settlements about Glencoe, Hutchinson, &c., northwest of us, the Fort Ridgely and Sioux Agency business in the west, and the settlements on the Cotton Wood in the southwest must be concentrated here as a matter of necessity, while an immense timbered section of country east will be soon filled up, and add materially to the business of our town. The Pembina train of teams will come direct from Graham's point on the Red River to this place, and hereafter a large portion of the supplies for the extensive business of the Red River will be shipped to this point and carried hence in teams.

¹⁷ McLeod to John H. Stevens, July 18, 1852, Stevens Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society; Hughes, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 158.

¹⁸ Hughes, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 158.

During last summer the amount of freight landed at Henderson for transportation to the Fort and Agency exceeded that of all the other points on the Minnesota combined. Over fifty tons per week was forwarded from this point to Fort Ridgely alone.

The numerous teams owned in our vicinity, and ready at all times to transport supplies to the different points in the interior, afford facilities for the transit of goods from this point not possessed by any other place on the River, while the freight by water to this landing is from fifteen to fifty cents per hundred pounds less than to the shipping points above.¹⁹

Five different stage lines were advertised in the spring of 1856 in the *Henderson Democrat*. Two of these — the Henderson, Glencoe, and Saint Cloud Line of Stages, and the Henderson Transportation Company — went northward into the Big Woods. The latter concern, according to its advertisement, was “prepared to transport goods of all kinds from Henderson to the different points in the interior with punctuality and dispatch, immediately after the opening of Navigation. The Company has made such arrangements as will enable them to transport freight to Fort Ridgely, Sioux Agency, Glencoe, Hutchinson, without delay after its arrival at Henderson.” Another service advertised by this company was described as follows: “Saddle, Carriage, and Buggy horses will be kept ready for the accomodation of persons arriving by Steam Boats, and desirous of visiting the interior, and returning by the same Boat.”²⁰

On May 8, 1856, Henderson was filled with strangers on their way to or returning from Glencoe and Hutchinson, according to the *Democrat* of that date. A writer in the same issue declared that “A party of 30 left here for these towns last week, taking teams, stock, provisions, &c with them. There were several ladies among the party. This is the only point that the river can be approached with teams, from these

¹⁹ *Henderson Democrat*, April 3, 1856. In 1857 a hundred pounds of freight could be shipped from St. Paul to Shakopee for twenty-five cents, to Le Sueur for forty cents, to Traverse des Sioux or St. Peter for fifty cents, and to Mankato for seventy-five cents. *Pioneer and Democrat*, April 25, 1857.

²⁰ *Henderson Democrat*, April 3, 1856.



**People's
Minnesota River
PACKET.**

THE Fine light draught and fast running Passenger and Freight Steamer

MIDORA,

EDWARD McLAGON, . . . Master,

Will run during the entire season in the Minnesota River trade. Will contract freight to any point between St. Paul and Fort Ridgely during the season of navigation. The Midora is entirely new and draws only 14 inches water.

WILLIAM CONSTANS, *A'gt.*
St. Paul, M. T., Feb. 9, 1857. nol1

MINNESOTA RIVER Accommodation Packet

EQUATOR.

CHAS. E. SENCERBOX, Master.

The Proprietors of this truly Minnesota River Boat, take this opportunity of tendering their sincere thanks for the very liberal patronage they received during the last season, and now have the pleasure of announcing to the shippers of St. Paul and the inhabitants of the Minnesota Valley, that they are refitting and refurnishing the Steamer Equator in a superior manner, and will be in readiness upon the opening of navigation, to resume her regular trips on the Minnesota River.

The Steamer Equator is owned exclusively by citizens of Minnesota, and will be kept running for the accommodation of the public in the dull season as well as in the more business part. Her earnings are spent among the people from whom it is received, instead of being taken away by transient boats at the commencement of the dull season; with the consoling assurance that they have taken the cream of the business, and the inhabitants of Minnesota may then do the best they can. There are no *Pittsburg* interests in the Equator to divert her from the trade, and the proprietors would respectfully solicit a continuance of the patronage heretofore enjoyed. The proprietors of the Steamer Equator, will have a boat in readiness at the commencement of the low water season, that will only require a heavy *dew* to enable her to run.
Saint Paul, February 20, 1857. nol6 6m

interior towns, at present." On May 15 the paper recorded the arrival of the Hutchinson family and noted that over two hundred people had passed through Henderson in the past three weeks bound for Hutchinson and Glencoe. Two weeks later, on May 29, the influx was so great that it was predicted that there would not be an unoccupied claim within twenty miles of Henderson at the end of another month.

Thus the mad stampede up the Minnesota River and off into the interior continued. It was not merely Henderson, moreover, which was enjoying such phenomenal prosperity. All along the river the growth was astonishing. A St. Peter paper advised other cities along the Minnesota to cease tearing one another down by their persistent "croaking." In June, 1856, a large supply of

STEAMBOAT ADVERTISEMENTS

[From the *St. Peter Courier*,
June 3, 1857.]

goods, including two hundred barrels of flour for the firm of Bigsby and Gardner, was rolled off the steamboat "Equator" completely blocking the St. Peter levee. This concern had received over two hundred tons of merchandise since the opening of navigation for the season and the entire stock had not yet arrived.²¹

By 1857 steamboating had become so vital a factor in the everyday life of St. Peter that local merchants were utterly dependent upon it for the bulk of their goods. The business of St. Peter had grown with such rapidity that it practically equaled that of St. Paul four years earlier.²² The *Courier* of June 3, 1857, published the following statement:

We can gather some idea of the vast importance of Steamboating to the Minnesota Valley, when we reflect that these boats have transported along this valley 150 tons each, in their upward trips, or 7,500 tons, exclusive of passengers. This freight transported in wagons from St. Paul, at one dollar and fifty cents per hundred, would cost the sum of \$225,000, while the cost by the steamboats would only, at 40 cents per hundred, amount to the sum of \$60,000, a saving to the freighters of \$165,000 since the opening of navigation. The business will continue, at least, another month, and these figures will be nearly or quite doubled.

Astonished by the information that the steamboat "Reveille" brought copies of late papers from the "Valley Towns," a passenger who had been on board the "Yankee" during her memorable trip gave vent to the following reverie:

Six years ago, and all that was visible to the explorers on the Anthony Wayne and Yankee, were gentle, peaceful slopes, moss covered banks, prairies bedecked with flowers, and rich luxuriant forest trees. The only signs of life were curling wreaths of smoke from out the apex of a wigwam, with here and there a brave standing idle and listless upon the banks, looking in mute astonishment upon the passing steamer. At intervals, could be heard

²¹ *St. Peter Courier*, June 11, 1856.

²² *Courier*, December 11, 1857. Merchandise sold in St. Peter in 1857 was valued as follows: groceries and provisions, \$120,000; dry goods, \$90,000; clothing, \$75,000; hardware, tinware, and stoves, \$20,000; boots and shoes, \$14,000; crockery and glassware, \$6,000.

the crack of a warrior's rifle on ahead, and soon a rustling would be heard in the underbrush, and a wounded deer, all blood and foam, would dash into the boiling current, and vainly essay to stem its force. Flocks of ducks and geese, unaccustomed to the sight of man, would rise reluctantly from almost beneath the wheels of the steamer. These were the scenes of 1850. *How changed!* Now a dozen embryo cities sit proudly on its banks, whilst settlers and settlers' homes occupy almost every mile of space. From Shakopee, Henderson and Saint Peter, the press issues forth its thousands every week, and the 'valley' and the 'valley towns' are fast rising into importance, and increasing in wealth and beauty.²³

While immigrants and immigrant supplies to the valley towns formed the chief steamboat cargo, the transportation of government supplies and Indian annuities was a source of profit that greatly stimulated steamboating. Thus, in June, 1851, the "Excelsior" carried the treaty commissioners with their attendants and supplies to Traverse des Sioux. The "Dr. Franklin No. 1" took a large delegation of St. Paul citizens to the same place to witness the signing of the treaty. Later in the same year, the "Uncle Toby" went wheezing up the Minnesota to the Sioux crossing with a cargo of freight.²⁴

Steamboating was given a tremendous impetus in 1853 by the erection of a Sioux agency and of Fort Ridgely near the mouth of the Redwood River. The contract for conveying troops and baggage from Fort Snelling to the new post was secured by Captain Daniel Smith Harris of the "West Newton." Despite a heavy tow of two barges this boat made its way swiftly up the Minnesota. At Henderson it passed the "Clarion." That boat had left the fort with a heavy tow twenty-four hours before the "West Newton," but had had difficulty in stemming the thirty-foot stage of water that flooded the lowlands of the Minnesota Valley. Farther on,

²³ *Henderson Democrat*, May 22, 1856.

²⁴ *Minnesota Democrat*, June 3, 17, October 7, 1851; Hughes, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 137.

near the mouth of the Cottonwood, the "West Newton" sighted and quickly passed the "indominatable" "Tiger." Despite a forty-eight hour lead, the "Tiger" was unable to keep ahead of Captain Harris' boat, which was one of the fastest on the upper Mississippi. The "West Newton" was the first steamboat to navigate the waters of the Minnesota River from the mouth of the Cottonwood to the site of Fort Ridgely. The "Tiger" and "Clarion" were following hard in its wake, however; thus at one time there were three steamboats on the waters of the Minnesota River far above the point reached by the "Yankee" in 1850.²⁵

In 1855 the "Globe" carried the supplies with which annuities were paid to the Sioux at the Redwood agency. The following year the "Clarion" took a hundred and fifty tons of government supplies from Le Sueur to the agency. With two deeply freighted barges in tow, eighteen hundred barrels of flour, six hundred barrels of pork, a hundred barrels of lard, and three thousand bushels of corn, Captain R. M. Spencer's "Fire Canoe" was at the St. Paul levee in the spring of 1857, ready to go to the Redwood agency.²⁶ Scores of other craft, similarly laden, transported supplies to Fort Ridgely and the Sioux agency, perhaps bringing to steamboat captains their richest gains.

The heyday of steamboating on the Minnesota River spans the eleven-year period from 1855 to 1865, when almost three thousand arrivals were recorded at the St. Paul wharves. The banner years in this era were 1858 and 1862, when 394 and 413 trips from the Minnesota River were chronicled at the St. Paul levee. Not all the steamboats arriving at this point came from the uppermost reaches of the Minnesota.

²⁵ *Minnesotian*, May 7, 1853. This material is reprinted, *post*, p. 164-180.

²⁶ *Henderson Democrat*, May 22, 1856; *Pioneer and Democrat*, April 30, May 6, 1857; Captain Edwin Bell, "Early Steamboating on the Minnesota and Red Rivers," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 92 (part 1).

In 1858 the diminutive thirty-seven ton "Antelope," commanded by Captain George Houghton, was responsible for 210 of the 394 arrivals, and in 1860 it registered 198 of the 250 landings at St. Paul. Seldom carrying anything but passengers, the "Antelope" served as a daily packet between St. Paul and Chaska at the foot of the lower rapids. During its six years of service on the Minnesota River, this boat was responsible for perhaps a third of the total number of arrivals that were recorded during the period of greatest activity.²⁷

Though subject to all the vicissitudes which the rapids, a narrow channel, a small volume of water, and a limited season of navigation caused, transportation by steamboat was cheaper and quicker than with slow-moving ox teams that tediously trundled over the deep-rutted roads. Only limited quantities of freight could be transported by stage during the cold winter months, and the close of navigation always caused the market price of commodities to soar. Thus, in 1852, the price of goods in St. Paul jumped twenty to thirty per cent when the season of navigation came to a close. Butter, for instance, which had been purchased for from nine to fifteen cents, was selling for as high as thirty and forty cents per pound. The *Minnesotian* of November 20, 1852, branded these prices as a "scandalous shame" and criticized sharply those merchants who justified them because two or three steamboats had failed to arrive. It further declared that people would refuse to eat butter under these circumstances. Another St. Paul paper noted that the local merchants as usual were late about receiving their winter stock of merchandise, and they were severely upbraided for a procrastination that forced them to pay a dollar rather than twenty-five cents per hundred-weight for freight. "There is not much regularity respecting the markets," runs a statement in a Shakopee paper of 1855. "Prices seem to be according to circumstances, groceries and provisions in general, all seem to be on the advance


²⁷ Hughes, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 158, 159.

since the close of navigation." The next winter the markets exhibited the same unsteadiness at Shakopee. Provisions of many kinds soared in price, and the rise in the cost of freight from below caused a slight advance on grain and flour.²⁸

After a long winter siege the towns along the river began to look forward with impatience to the opening of navigation. Late in March, 1857, a Shakopee paper urged its readers to listen for the whistle of the first steamboat. Mid-April ushered in the opening of navigation. Late on a rainy Sunday night the citizens of Shakopee were awakened from their slumbers by the hoarse, weird moan of a steamboat whistle. In a twinkling the levee was alive with people. As the boat glided triumphantly up to the landing with its flags flying, its whistles blowing, and a

brass band dispensing martial music, the assembled throng burst into a frenzy of wild huzzas. Guns were fired, hats were thrown into the air — a new year had opened for the

²⁸ *Pioneer*, November 11, 1852; *Shakopee Independent*, December 1, 1855; *Valley Herald* (Shakopee), November 19, 1856.


 THE STEAMER FRANK STEKLE, Wm. F. DAVIDSON, Master, will, on the opening of navigation, make regular trips from St. Paul to Mankato and intermediate points, leaving St. Paul every Tuesday and Friday regularly.
mar23 BRUNSON, LEWIS & WHITE, Agents.

FOR MINNESOTA RIVER.

 THE DAILY MAIL PACKET, ANTELOPE, will leave every day for Chaska and intermediate points, as follows :
Leaves St. Paul at.....2 o'clock P. M.
Leaves Chaska at.....6 o'clock A. M.
For Freight or Passage apply aboard.
mar24-s G. HOUGHTON, Master.

1858. SEASON ARRANGEMENT. 1858.

REGULAR ST. PAUL AND RED WOOD LOWER SIOUX AGENCY MINNESOTA RIVER PACKET, IN CONNECTION WITH THE LOWER RIVER PACKETS, For -hakopee, Chaska, Carver, Louisville, Little Rapids, St. Lawrence, Belle Plaine, Henderson, Le Sueur, Ottawa, Traverse, St. Peter, Kasota, Mankato, South Bend, Jordan, New Ulm, Fort Ridgely, and Red Wood Lower Sioux Agency.

 THE LIGHT DRAUGHT AND ELLEGANT Passenger Steamer, TIME AND TIDE, NELSON ROBERTS, Master, will, on the earliest opening of navigation, commence running as a regular Packet to the above and all intermediate points, continuing in the trade during the entire boating season.

Captain N. Roberts begs to assure his Minnesota River friends that they will find her to be in all respects most admirably adapted to the wants of the river, being of great strength, lightness of draught, beauty of model, &c., with cabin arrangement and accommodation not surpassed by those of any boats on the river, combining all the latest and most modern improvements that could add to the safety, comfort and pleasure of passengers. Nothing will be found wanting in any of her appointments, which belong to those of a first-class passenger steamer.

Capt. N. Roberts hopes to receive at the hands of his numerous friends along the river, a continuance of that generous patronage for which he is indebted during a series of years, while in command of different boats, and for which he hereby desires to present his most grateful acknowledgments, promising increased exertions of himself and officers to give the most perfect satisfaction to all who travel on the TIME AND TIDE, or with whose business in any way his boat may be honored.

For Freight Passage and information apply to her Agent, DAVID O. OAKES,
St. Paul, M. T., Lower Levee, between Jackson and Roberts sts.
mar2)

STEAMBOAT ADVERTISEMENTS

[From the *Pioneer and Democrat*
(St. Paul), July 8, 1858.]

little town of Shakopee. And through all the excitement Captain Charles Sencerbox beamed down from the deck of the "Equator," his ambition realized. The "Equator" was the first boat to ascend the Minnesota that year.²⁹ The progress of the first boat of the season was regularly accompanied by a series of joyful demonstrations, and the captain who was fortunate enough to bring his craft to port first was certain of a liberal patronage throughout the ensuing year.

Midsummer usually brought low water, and the merchants along the Minnesota were inclined to order a heavy supply of merchandise early in the season to guard against a shortage in case the boats should be unable to proceed on their regular schedule. "The merchants and business men of the valley are taking advantage of the high water," according to the *Henderson Democrat* of May 1, 1856, "and are bringing up a larger amount of goods and stock than that of the two preceding years. Several steam mills are being erected in different parts of the valley, and the present high water affords facilities for getting the machinery, with but little cost or delay." Fresh and salt beef were unobtainable; pork was scarce; flour and corn meal had given out; and butter was bringing thirty cents a pound and eggs twenty-five cents a dozen in little Henderson before the opening of navigation in 1856. Each spring immigrants arrived in huge waves, for they chose to travel, if possible, at a time when transportation was certain. For example, in 1856 the "Reveille," Captain R. M. Spencer commanding, left St. Paul late in April with 370 passengers and a heavy cargo of freight, and discharged a generous portion of each at Henderson. Three days later this boat again made its appearance on the Minnesota with four hundred passengers and their "goods and chattels" jammed aboard. The rosy prospects of similar trips induced the owners of the "Reveille" and the "Equator" to purchase the "H. T. Yeatman" to run

²⁹ *Valley Herald*, March 25, April 15, 1857.

in conjunction with their other boats. The "Yeatman" was a large stern-wheeler of 165 tons, capable of accommodating six hundred passengers. On its maiden voyage up the Minnesota it "brought the heaviest load ever shipped from St. Paul for the Minnesota Valley." One June day the "Time and Tide" left 1,147 sacks of corn, 239 barrels of flour, 129 barrels of pork, and 150 tons of other freight at Henderson; and the "Globe" came puffing into port the next day and discharged an additional 30 tons.³⁰

Navigation on the Minnesota River was usually possible several weeks before the first steamboat arrived at St. Paul from below because of the length of time required for Lake Pepin to open. Since each spring only a small quantity of freight remained in St. Paul from the previous winter, the trade of the Minnesota was rather light until fresh supplies were procured from the lower Mississippi. The winter of 1856-57 was unusually severe, and the Minnesota was open for navigation three weeks before Lake Pepin relinquished its grip on the upper Mississippi. Ten boats lay at the foot of the lake several days before it opened, and a number of others were docked three miles below at Wabasha. In this colorful flotilla were steamboats hailing from distant Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. On April 29 twenty-two craft were assembled, crowded with passengers who impatiently awaited the moving out of the ice. The more venturesome captains had for several days butted their prows against the unbreakable wall in vain attempts to crash their way through.³¹

Fifteen hundred passengers impatiently fumed at the delay of the twenty-two stranded craft at the foot of Lake Pepin. Hundreds of others, exasperated at the obdurate tenacity of the lake, set out on foot for Red Wing, willing to endure the

³⁰ *Henderson Democrat*, April 10, May 1, 8, 15, June 5, 1856; George B. Merrick "Steamboats and Steamboatmen on the Upper Mississippi," in *Saturday Evening Post* (Burlington, Iowa), November 20, 1915.

³¹ *Pioneer and Democrat*, April 28, 29, 30, 1857.

greatest hardships and inconvenience in order to reach St. Paul and the valley beyond earlier than was possible if they remained with their boats. At Red Wing they were met by the Minnesota River boats, which flourished on this early season business made up of passengers who cared little for the facilities provided. On April 16 the "Reveille" arrived at St. Paul from Red Wing, her decks thronged with people. "Most of those who came in her," according to a contemporary account, "were obliged to be content, so far as sleeping arrangements were concerned, with a chance to lie two deep on the greasy cabin floor, with their carpet bags under their heads for pillows, whilst the wind whistled a lullaby through the broken and almost sashless windows of the vessel."³² Since Lake Pepin did not open until April 30 in 1857 the owners of the "Reveille," the "Time and Tide," and any other Minnesota River steamboats that were prepared to make the trips were able to amass snug fortunes before their season actually began on the Minnesota. Before daylight on April 17 the "Time and Tide" came into St. Paul with a full load of passengers and the Red Wing band. At the prevailing rates for passage, the fares of the 246 cabin and 197 deck passengers netted the owner of the boat \$1,821 for a single trip. This amount alone was almost equal to its passenger receipts for the first five trips on the Minnesota in 1857. On April 24 of that year the "Time and Tide" brought 196 cabin passengers and 145 "deckers" from Red Wing; three days later the same craft came booming up to the St. Paul levee with 368 passengers perched precariously about its decks from stem to stern and occupying all available space from engine room to texas. Such trips must have brought a broad grin to the countenance of its owner, the jovial and picturesque Captain Louis Robert. It was only five years since he had purchased the little steamboat "Black Hawk" for six thousand dollars to run regularly on the Minnesota River. At

³² *Pioneer and Democrat*, April 17, 29, 1857.

the time the boat was the subject of lively newspaper comment, for it was the first steamboat owned entirely in St. Paul. In 1857 the "Time and Tide" alone earned enough in the spring trade between St. Paul and Red Wing to pay the original cost of the historic "Black Hawk."³³

A final yawn of the seemingly bottomless old Lake Pepin split and ripped its winter coat wide open and produced a narrow but dangerous lane for the intrepid steamboat captains to venture through. And venture they did. Battering their way through giant blocks of shifting, crumbling ice, the "War Eagle" and the "Galena" started up the ice-choked lake, risking all to gain the coveted laurel that went to the first steamboat to reach St. Paul. Hard in their frozen wake followed such boats as the "Rescue," the "Henry Clay," the "Hamburg," the "Atlanta," the "Conewago," the "Sam Young," the "Golden State," and a dozen others. Just below St. Paul, when victory was almost in the "War Eagle's" grasp, a deck hand fell overboard and a yawl put out to rescue the unfortunate man. It was a humane but costly act. On May 2, 1857, the *Pioneer and Democrat* noted that Captain W. H. Laughton brought his "Galena" into port at 2:00 A.M. on May 1 and that the "War Eagle" landed fifteen minutes later.

And then the deluge! Twenty-five hundred tons of freight were dumped pell-mell upon the St. Paul levee in forty-eight hours by the score of boats that followed the "Galena" and "War Eagle." The St. Paul levee was the "only place of attraction" on those busy, bustling first two days of May, 1857. And on May 3 an additional two thousand tons were discharged, which kept every dray and wagon in St. Paul busy throughout the day and far into the night.³⁴ From Dubuque

³³ *Pioneer*, July 8, 1852; *Pioneer and Democrat*, April 18, 25, 28, 1857; manuscript register of the "Time and Tide," on deposit with the Minnesota Historical Society.

³⁴ *Pioneer and Democrat*, May 3, 5, 1857.

and Galena, St. Louis and New Orleans, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, came the goods that formed the principal cargoes for steamboats running from St. Paul to the embryonic but swiftly growing valley towns of the Minnesota River. And from Chaska, Shakopee, Carver, Henderson, St. Peter, Mankato, and still smaller entrepôts, the Big Woods country was supplied through the medium of the steamboats that made possible the rapid growth and development of the region.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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