STEAMBOATING as a means of commercial transportation on the upper Mississippi River between Aitkin and Grand Rapids began in 1870. By 1920 it was a thing of the past. It is no coincidence that the same years mark the beginning and the end of large-scale lumbering in northern Minnesota, since steamboating in the area was largely a by-product of the lumber industry. It rose with lumbering and died with it.

In 1870 the railroad reached the river at the spot where Aitkin now stands. The village was founded in the next year and, as the northernmost settlement on both the river and the railroad at the time, it became the base of supplies for the logging camps in this region. Grand Rapids lies just below Pokegama Falls, a natural barrier to steamboat passage farther upstream.

Logging along the upper Mississippi in the late nineteenth century was “big business.” In 1872, over 40,000,000 board feet of logs were floated downstream from points above the mouth of the Crow Wing River. By 1880 the annual output there amounted to 226,000,000 feet, a figure which did not decrease until after 1910. The peak of production was reached in 1904 with approximately half a billion feet of logs. After 1911 annual production fell sharply, until in 1919 the output was only 150,000 feet. In a dying access of energy, 1,100,000 feet of logs were sent downstream in 1920; thereafter use of the river for log drives practically ceased.¹

All this took manpower, horse, mule, and

¹Who’s Who in Minnesota, 36 (Minneapolis, 1941); United States Army, Chief of Engineers, “Reports,” in 51 Congress, 1 session, House Ex-
ox power, and a great deal of it. At the beginning of one season more than two thousand men were reported to have passed through Aitkin on their way upriver to work in the logging camps. It is obvious that large amounts of supplies were needed to provide sustenance alone for men and work animals. In the fiscal year ending June 30, 1880, upstream commerce from Aitkin totalled more than five and a half million pounds of groceries, feed, hardware, coal, and salt. In that year there were only 366 permanent residents in the entire area of Aitkin County. Clearly, therefore, all but a very small part of the shipments upriver were for use in the logging camps.

River commerce throughout the period when logging was the major industry in this region depended largely upon steamboats, whose carrying capacity ranged from thirty to a hundred tons each. This tonnage was not infrequently supplemented by barges towed by these boats, capable of carrying from forty to fifty tons each. Each year, also, before the logging season, the boats towed upstream a number of wangi- gans, or houseboats, which were conveyed to the mouths of the smaller streams and then poled up to the desired locations near the camps where they were used as cook shacks, bunkhouses, or headquarters. Wangi- gans also carried a considerable amount of supplies.

Throughout the entire half century of steamboating on the Aitkin-Grand Rapids stretch of river, a vital relationship existed between the river and the rails as highways for commercial transportation. Steamboats and the railroads came together. The steamboats served as an essential extension of the railroads to camps, communities, and persons along the river who could be readily reached in no other way, until the automobile and trunk highways revolutionized passenger and freight transportation.

Below Pokegama Falls the Mississippi flows in a general southeasterly direction until it encounters a glacial moraine near the southern boundary of Itasca County. For the last thirty-five miles of its course through Aitkin County, it meanders back and forth across the bed of a post-glacial lake called by geologists Lake Aitkin. This ancient lake was about eighteen or twenty miles long and from three to five miles wide. The course of the river in this area is extremely crooked, taking thirty-six miles to traverse an airline distance of about nine and four-tenths miles. The total fall is about eleven and a half feet, or less than four inches to the mile, and there are fourteen bends where the distance around the bend is at least four or five times that across the neck or portage.

In its course from Grand Rapids to Aitkin the Mississippi is joined by six small streams—the Swan, Sandy, Big Willow, Rice, Mud, and Little Willow. In addition there are a number of confluent creeks which served as logging streams in the heyday of the lumber industry.

The distance by river from Aitkin to Grand Rapids, as given by the United States Army Engineers, is a hundred and thirty and one-eighth miles. The estimated distance as given by the steamboat operators varies from a hundred and fifty to a hundred and seventy-five miles. At present the distance between the two villages by road is fifty-three miles, and the airline distance is slightly over forty miles.

The course of the river is extremely tortuous, and the distance between its banks is rarely more than two hundred feet. The narrow channel winds back and forth across the bed of the stream and has a minimum depth of only two or three feet, and it is marked by a series of shallow

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* 51 Congress, 2 session, House Executive Documents, no. 1, pt. 2, p. 2078 (serial 2834).
rapids where, except at high water, bars and boulders were a constant hazard. All this posed a problem in navigation requiring knowledge and skill very different from that needed by pilots on the lower river. Several lower-river pilots are said to have tried handling boats on this stretch, but they abandoned the attempt in disgust and returned to piloting where they did not have to “dig their own channels,” where the river bed was not “dusty in places,” and where they did not have to resort to capstan and cable to pull their boats around sharp bends.

There were some twenty-five regular landings between Aitkin and Grand Rapids at which boats stopped both on up and down trips. In addition, advertisements of the boat schedules often contained the statement that “landings will be made wherever desired en route.” In later days farmers living along the river would hang out signal flags, and the boats would stop to pick up milk cans or other produce and to take orders for goods to be delivered on the next trip.

Sometimes these signals had tragic significance. On one trip upriver Captain C. C. Sutton of the “Fawn,” one of the many colorful captains interviewed by the writer, saw a signal flag displayed near the Pine Grove cemetery. Sutton was not only a captain and pilot but a doctor and preacher as well. In this instance, when he tied up to the bank, he found that a little boy had drowned. Relatives and friends, assembled for the funeral, awaited his arrival. Captain Sutton preached the funeral sermon, went back to his boat, and proceeded up the river.

STEAMBOATING immediately above the Falls of St. Anthony began in 1850 and continued until 1879. During these years boats ran on fairly regular schedules as far north as Sauk Rapids, a barrier to further upstream navigation at all ordinary water stages. By 1879 the land on either side of this stretch of the Mississippi had been stripped of its marketable pine; lumbering had been replaced by agriculture as the major industry of the region; and the railroads were providing for the transportation of goods and products. These developments spelled the end of steamboating below Sauk Rapids.

At least once, however, the Sauk Rapids barrier was surmounted by a steamer. In 1858 Anson Northup, a St. Paul contractor and builder, purchased the “North Star,” a steamboat which had been operating between St. Anthony and Sauk Rapids. The boat was renamed the “Anson North-up” and, according to the Sauk Rapids Frontierman of May 6, 1858, the new owner took his craft over Sauk Rapids and left immediately for Pokegama Falls, near which Grand Rapids was later located. No details of the trip are available, but the boat apparently reached the upper falls and returned to Sauk Rapids without difficulty. In June, the boat made a second trip, on which it crossed Sandy Lake. Whatever the promoter of these expeditions may have had in mind, they had no lasting results, for the “Anson Northup” was dismantled during the winter of 1858–59 and the parts transported overland to the Red River. No further attempts at steam navigation were made on the upper Mississippi until 1870.

THE NORTHERN PACIFIC had completed its line from the Twin Cities to Duluth by 1870, and had begun a western extension which was designed to reach the Mississippi far enough north to be of service to the rapidly expanding lumber industry in this region. At least one man saw the opportunity and the need for steamboat transportation north of Sauk Rapids and, with characteristic pioneer energy, he proceeded to do something about it. That man was Captain George H. Houghton, who had previously been engaged in steamboating on the Minnesota River and who, for more than twenty years to come, was to be so prominently identified with the

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upper Mississippi that he earned the title of father of navigation on this stretch of river.

In the winter of 1869–70 Captain Houghton built at Sauk Rapids a boat which was launched on April 13, 1870, and christened the “Pokegama.” It was a stern-wheeler, a hundred feet long, with a twenty-four foot beam and a two foot draft. The “Pokegama” started its first trip upstream on June 20, reached Crow Wing on June 24, Sandy Lake on June 26, and the foot of Pokegama Falls on June 27. During the rest of the season, it ran from Crow Wing, at that time the most northerly village of any size along the upper river, to Pokegama Falls, making such trips as they were needed.

On one trip it carried supplies for Northern Pacific construction crews, which were then operating in the vicinity of what is now McGregor. This trip took the “Pokegama” through Sandy Lake, up Sandy River, and into Davis Lake, where the supplies were landed. Persons familiar with this narrow and shallow stream today might be inclined to regard this as a “Believe It or Not” exploit, but the “Pokegama” was only the first of a long line of upper river steamers which could “run on a heavy dew.” With Aitkin as its home port, this vessel continued to supply the logging camps from 1871 to 1877. On November 12, 1877, the “Pokegama” was destroyed by fire after it had been put up for the winter.

UPPER RIVER commerce in 1878 was handled by a side-wheeler named the “White Swan,” a boat built at Brainerd by Alsop and Mahlum. It was seventy feet long, with a sixteen foot beam and three foot draft. The “White Swan” left Aitkin on its first trip to Pokegama Falls on April 8, 1878, and returned on April 23, taking twelve days for the round trip. It was advertised to leave Aitkin every Thursday and Pokegama every Monday. Unprecedentedly low water prevented trips during the summer and fall. Possibly for this reason, and possibly because its type of side-wheel construction was not suitable for successful negotiation of the narrow channel, the boat
was dismantled at the end of the season, and the parts were shipped to the Red River for reconstruction and service there.\(^6\)

Meanwhile Captain Houghton was engaged in building a successor to the “Pokegama.” The new boat, named the “City of Aitkin,” was a hundred and twenty feet long and had a twenty-two foot beam. It was built in 1877-78 and it made its trial run on July 3, 1878. Thereafter it was advertised to make weekly trips to Pokegama Falls, leaving Aitkin every Wednesday. Because of low water, the “City of Aitkin” was able to make only five trips during the entire season of 1879, and it carried upstream only a hundred and fifty tons of freight and a hundred and twenty passengers.\(^7\) Most of the supplies for the lumber camps had to be transported by flatboats poled and dragged upstream by hand.

Business for the “Aitkin” increased decidedly in 1880, when almost four thousand tons of freight and a thousand passengers were transported from Aitkin to Grand Rapids and intervening points. With freight rates at seventy-five cents to a dollar per hundredweight, this meant a good income for the owners. In fact, business was so good that Captain Houghton and his associates began to build a second steamer. The “City of Aitkin” continued in service until 1883 with Captain Houghton in command most of the time. In the last year of its service the boat carried upstream much of the material used in the construction of government dams at and above Pokegama Lake. On September 14, 1883, the “Aitkin” sank at its dock after falling water caused it to list.\(^8\) The boat was raised and returned to service late in October. When the season ended on November 8, the owners rebuilt the boat to reduce its draft.

In 1881 the Army Engineers reported that as a result of the improvement of the river, “the prospect of continuous navigation during the entire season and the large increase in lumbering on the upper river, rendered an increase in carrying capacity both desirable and remunerative.” Captain Houghton took advantage of this opportunity to build the “Fawn.” This boat, his third, plied the waters of the upper Mississippi from 1882 to 1894—longer than any other steamboat on this stretch of river. The “Fawn” was built in 1881 and came into service the following season. It was originally much smaller than the “City of Aitkin,” measuring eighty-five feet long with a fourteen foot beam and a draft of fourteen inches empty and two and a half feet when fully loaded. Later both its length and its breadth were increased. It could carry sixty-five tons of freight when there was a good stage of water and no logs were running.\(^9\)

In 1885 the “Fawn” was purchased by Captain C. C. Sutton, who served either as pilot or captain for the greater part of the boat’s thirteen years of service. Sutton came to the upper river in the 1870’s after spending a number of years on steamboats operating out of St. Louis. In a personal interview in 1935 he spoke of the “Fawn” with evident pride, recalling that it had established a record for the fastest round trip between Aitkin and Grand Rapids. He added that the “Fawn” was never frozen in and always got through.

The trip to Grand Rapids and back rarely took as much as a week. In one instance, however, on the trip upstream, Captain Sutton encountered a big log jam just below Sandy Lake, and he was held up there for twenty days. A crew of more than forty loggers worked in vain to break the jam. At last, Captain Sutton tried to

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\(^6\) Brainerd Tribune, March 16, April 6, 27, October 12, 1878.

\(^7\) Brainerd Tribune, July 6, 13, 1878; 46 Congress, 3 session, House Executive Documents, no. 1, pt. 2, p. 1575 (serial 1954).

\(^8\) 51 Congress, 1 session, House Executive Documents, no. 1, pt. 2, p. 1789, 1791 (serial 2718); Aitkin Age, September 15, 1883.

\(^9\) 47 Congress, 1 session, House Executive Documents, no. 1, pt. 2, p. 1746 (serial 2012); interview with Captain C. C. Sutton, 1935.
break it with his capstan, snatch block, and fifteen hundred feet of cable. With them he removed one by one the logs forming the jam until the river was clear above him. On his return he found another jam a few miles below the site of the first, and again he had to help the loggers break it. The “Fawn” returned to Aitkin thirty days after its departure. During its last two years of service the “Fawn” spent part of each season under contract with the Weyerhaeuser lumber interests, who used the boat for towing rafts and breaking log jams.

The “Fawn” ran the river alone in 1893, but in 1894 a new steamer, the “Swan,” appeared. The Aitkin Age for June 16, 1894, announced that “Hon. J. M. Markham’s steamboat Swan, Capt. Wm. Hay in command, took a lot of passengers and freight up river Friday.” No description of the boat is available, but it was sometimes characterized as a “little steamer.” It operated practically alone during the season of 1894, when the “Fawn” was approaching the end of its long service. At the opening of the season the latter was reported to be lying “near the mouth of Mud river, with the water over her hurricane deck.” That it was raised and again prepared for service is evident, since the Aitkin Republican of September 27, 1894, states it had begun making regular trips to Grand Rapids. Early in November the “Fawn” struck a snag below the mouth of Swan River and sank in the channel. The boat was never again raised and it went to pieces where it sank. There is an interesting story still current among the old-timers around Jacobson, a village near the mouth of Swan River, to the effect that the sinking of the “Fawn” was not accidental, but was a deliberate attempt to place the sunk-en boat in such a position that it would be damaged, at least in its superstructure, by the log drives coming down Swan River. This would have given the “Fawn’s” owners a claim for damages against the lumber companies. The lumbermen declined to be caught in any such trap and avoided the difficulty by driving pilings around the wreck to divert the logs, leaving the boat to go to pieces undisturbed.  

In addition to Captain Sutton, who sold the “Fawn” about 1893, a number of different men commanded this boat at one time or another. The list included F. W. Bonness in 1883 and 1884, G. W. and J. C. Knox, C. P. DeLaittre, James Long, and Captains Shook and Hawley in later years. Glen Sutton joined with his father as pilot late in the period of their ownership.

THE WITHDRAWAL of the “City of Aitkin” from river traffic at the close of the season of 1883 left a vacancy which was almost immediately filled by Lowell, West, and Bonness. They built the “Andy Gibson,” a stern-wheeler a hundred and thirty feet long, with a thirty-two foot beam, designed to carry a hundred tons of freight and a hundred and fifty passengers. The Aitkin Age of May 17, 1884, says that it drew only twelve inches of water empty and two feet with a full cargo. Later the length was extended to over a hundred and forty feet, making it the largest boat ever to operate on this section of the river. The “Gibson” was built in the winter of 1883–84, and it entered service in April, 1884.

Competition between the “Andy Gibson” and the “Fawn” was keen. In addition to carrying what was at that time a record amount of freight—twenty-five hundred tons—the two boats engaged in a contest to set the record for the fastest time in which a trip to and from Grand Rapids could be made. Ordinarily, even with the most favorable water stage and no interference from floating logs, the trip took

10 Aitkin Age, May 13, 1893, April 21, November 10, 1894; interviews with Fred Anschutz and Harry Riggs, 1948.
11 The following issues of the Aitkin Age give the names of these men: G. W. Knox, May 21, 1887, May 4, 1889, May 2, 1891; J. C. Knox, August 6, 1887; C. P. DeLaittre, April 26, 1890; Shook, May 28, 1892; Long, May 13, 1893; Hawley, October 30, 1894.
four days. During the week of June 6, 1885, the “Fawn” made the round trip in fifty-one hours and a week later it set another new record of forty-six hours. The “Andy Gibson” did not allow these laurels to lie unchallenged, and on July 2 the “Gibson” completed the round trip in thirty-seven hours.

In the week of July 18 the “Fawn” set the final record—one never equalled—when it made the trip in thirty-six hours. The achievement of the “Andy Gibson” is, however, remarkable considering its size. In 1889 the United States Army Engineers in charge of river improvement above Aitkin reported that caving banks were “in many places due to the powerful wheel of the Andy Gibson” which was “too long over all for the narrow widths and sharp bends which occur on this part of the stream.”

THE HOUGHTON LINE successor to the “City of Aitkin,” though long-awaited, did not make its appearance until 1886. The new boat was named the “George H. Houghton” in honor of the line’s founder. Captain Houghton personally supervised its construction and remained in charge during the greater part of its service. It was built at Aitkin by W. E. Neal of Grand Rapids and W. H. Eustis of Minneapolis, who used parts of the “City of Aitkin,” but installed entirely new engines and boilers. It was slightly smaller than its predecessor, being a hundred and fifteen feet long, with a twenty-one foot beam. It was said to draw fourteen inches of water and to have a freight capacity of a hundred tons. The “Houghton” was launched early in September, 1886, and made its first trip to Grand Rapids in the week of September 11. At the close of the season this boat “tried it once too often” and was frozen in just above Crooked Rapids on its final trip upstream.

The season of 1887 opened with a “line of three fine steamers ready to navigate the river” for fifty miles below and a hundred and fifty miles above Aitkin. Naturally competition for the river trade tended to lower freight rates, which fell to less than forty cents per hundred. The “Fawn,” the “Andy Gibson,” and the “George H. Houghton” continued to operate throughout the seasons of 1887 and 1888.

Commercial traffic was not always limited to the up-river run. Occasionally a boat went down to Brainerd or to Pine River and back, but these trips were not regularly scheduled and were made only when there was some special need.

Nor were the steamers limited to strictly commercial hauling. On a Sunday afternoon in June, 1886, the “Fawn” took a group up to John Lyon’s place near the mouth of Willow River, where “they strolled under the trees and gathered flowers.” “Crackers were passed every now and then so no one got hungry.” A moonlight excursion, “the first of the season with music and dancing on the lower deck,” was advertised for the “Andy Gibson” on
July 16, 1886. The boat was to leave the dock for a run up to Rice River and back at 8:00 p.m. and be home by midnight. The fare was fifty cents per person.

An excursion for teachers attending an institute at Aitkin came to be an annual event. In 1893 the "Fawn" was chartered by a committee at Grand Rapids to transport people from Aitkin who wished to attend a Fourth of July celebration at Grand Rapids. As late as 1910, a hundred and fifty persons joined in an excursion to Sandy Lake on the "Oriole" to see the new dam and celebrate the national holiday. The boat left Aitkin at three o'clock the morning of the Fourth, reached Sandy Lake about noon, and left the lake about two the next morning, returning to Aitkin about 9:00 a.m.

Just before the opening of navigation in 1889 the "George H. Houghton" burned at its mooring about twenty miles above Aitkin, leaving the "Fawn" and the "Gibson" to handle the business for the year. During this season the two boats carried thirty-five hundred tons of freight—a new record. In August the "Andy Gibson" carried to Grand Rapids men and supplies involved in the construction of the last stages of the Duluth and Winnipeg Railroad.15

The "Fawn" and the "Andy Gibson" continued to operate through the seasons of 1890, 1891, and 1892, except for a short period in 1890 when the "Gibson" was laid up for repairs. In 1891 the "Gibson" was purchased by the Potter Company and was used partly in logging operations and partly in "snagging" for government engineers. The boat was finally retired from service at the end of the 1892 season. Later its machinery was removed, and the boiler was used in the heating system of the Potter store at Aitkin. As late as 1906 the castings and machinery were sold by the Potter Company and shipped to Bena, where they were used in building a boat for handling logs on Lake Winnebagoshish.16

From 1884 through 1886 Captain Fred W. Bonness was in charge of the "Andy Gibson." He was succeeded for the next three years by Captain Lee West. John Steason was the "Gibson's" last captain, and John Lyon was its pilot during the greater part of its career in upper river transportation.17

The Aitkin Age of September 5, 1885, says that Captain Bonness was at the wheel of the "Andy Gibson" on a downstream trip when, in passing a difficult point, the nose of the boat ran aground on a bar. Before the captain realized what was happening, his boat swung around and steamed off up the river. Bonness soon discovered the mistake, however, turned the boat around, and started again in the right direction. The captain said the engineer was at fault, and that the mistake was made when he failed to answer the bells correctly. The "boys" said that Captain Fred was rattled.

In the summer of 1895 the Cluff brothers and James Taylor built for the river trade a small steamer which was first called the "Palace" but later officially christened the "Walter Taylor." This boat, fifty feet long, with a fifteen-foot beam, was designed to carry fifty tons of freight. The maiden trip of the new boat was made to Swan River on September 8 under the captaincy of James Taylor.18 Beginning on September 13 it made regular trips to Sandy Lake until the end of the season. A considerable amount of the business of the "Taylor" and the "Swan" in 1895 and in the years immediately thereafter consisted of carrying supplies and material for the government dam then being constructed at Sandy Lake. On June 29, 1895, the

15 Aitkin Age, March 30, August 31, 1889; 51 Congress, 2 session, House Executive Documents, no. 1, pt. 2, p. 2080 (serial 2834).
16 Interview with Captain W. F. Pustey, 1935; Aitkin Age, January 2, 1906.
17 Interview with Glen Sutton and letter from Mrs. John Schroeder, 1948.
18 Aitkin Age, August 3, September 7, 1895.
Aitkin Age noted that the "Swan" had gone upriver towing a barge with lumber for the government works at Sandy Lake. On July 10, 1897, the same paper reported that the "Taylor" took a thousand sacks of sand to Sandy Lake to be used in strengthening a dike which was threatened by rising water.

The "Swan" was the first boat to pass through the lock in the new dam, according to the Age of October 12, 1895. Captain Warren Chase took it through the lock, crossed the lake, and ascended Prairie River to the mouth of the West Savanna. On November 16, 1895, Captain Chase brought the "Swan" to its dock at Aitkin and tied it up for the winter, establishing a new record by closing navigation one day later than ever before. The "Swan" continued to operate in 1896, 1897, and 1898, being used for the most part in connection with log drives. The boat changed owners several times during the five years of its activity. According to the Age for September 25, 1896, Warren Chase sold it to Arthur Polley. The issue for June 25, 1898, reported that the "little steamer" had been sold by S. H. Hodgedon to George Maxfield and "Thos. Nephew," and that under the new proprietors the boat would make regular trips between Aitkin and Sandy Lake, carrying passengers and freight. No further record of its service has been found. According to Captain C. C. Sutton the "Swan" burned at the mouth of Mud River sometime later.

The "Walter Taylor" was the first boat to go through a new swinging bridge at Aitkin after it was completed in April, 1896. In October, 1897, because of overloading, the "Taylor" sank in twelve feet of water at the mouth of Sandy River. Within a few days it was raised and continued in service during the seasons of 1897, 1898, and 1899, but no mention of it has been found after 1899. In a letter to the author, Mrs. John Schroeder says that it finally sank at its Aitkin dock and was ultimately covered with sand.

Government engineers reported in 1901 that there was practically no navigation on the upper reaches of the Mississippi. The decline in river traffic was caused in part at least by the competition of the Duluth and Winnipeg Railroad (now the Great Northern), which after 1892 was in full operation between Grand Rapids and Duluth. Steamboating between Aitkin and Grand Rapids did not, however, come to an end.

Although the prospects seemed anything but encouraging, there were two men in Aitkin who believed in the future.
of steamboat traffic on the upper Mississippi and who were to control its development and progress for more than fifteen years, almost to the end of commercial transportation on the river. These men were Charles D. Viebahn and William F. Punteney. In 1899 Viebahn and an associate named Tully built a steamer which was launched early in June, 1900. It was christened the “Irene” in honor of Irene Hodgedon, daughter of S. H. Hodgedon, a prominent Aitkin businessman. The boat had a checkered career in its brief period of existence. In August, 1900, it sprang a leak, and Captain Viebahn was compelled to run it ashore about eighteen miles below Aitkin. It was soon repaired and it resumed business for the rest of the season. The “Irene” opened the season of 1901 toward the end of April and continued to ply the river until August 20, when it was destroyed by fire at its dock in Aitkin. Both boat and cargo were lost. The hull was raised from fourteen feet of water, but nothing of value was salvaged.

Viebahn was not discouraged by this loss, nor was his belief lessened that steamboat transportation was needed there. Punteney, who was manager of the electric light plant in Aitkin, joined with Viebahn to form the Mississippi Transportation Company. In November, 1901, they announced plans to build a successor to the “Irene” to be launched in the spring. The new seventy foot boat, launched in April, 1902, was also named the “Irene.” The Aitkin Age for April 8 announced that the boat would be ready for service as soon as the river opened up and then continued, “Up river people will have the advantage of water transportation, a convenience of which they have been greatly in need since the burning of the boat last August.” In an interview in 1935 Captain Punteney stated positively that “not a stick of the Irene No. 1 went into the Irene No. 2.” The new “Irene” enjoyed a virtual monopoly of river commerce in 1902, although several small unnamed boats carried some freight.

During the winter of 1902-03 the Mississippi Transportation Company made a number of substantial improvements in its craft. It was completely overhauled and repainted, the pilothouse was raised three feet, and the cabins were extended to the full size of the second deck. These were built around the dining room, leaving the entire first deck for cargo and machinery.

The ice went out of the river comparatively early in 1903, and the “Irene” made its first trip to Sandy Lake on April 20. The following week, regular trips to Grand Rapids were inaugurated. During the season it carried 1,200 passengers and 2,225 tons of freight, valued at $101,750.00. The 1904-05 report of the United States Army chief of engineers contained the following prediction: “The lumber interests upon the stream will remain as large as at present for some years. Above Grand Rapids those interests will increase. As the timber is removed, agricultural business will grow. The country . . . is difficult for road building and the river will become more and more an artery for commerce.”

IN MAY, 1903, it became known that the Finnish Colonization Company had purchased sixty thousand acres of land in Aitkin County and that immigrants from Finland, then under the tyranny of the Czar, would be arriving soon to occupy the holdings of the company. The June 9 issue of the Aitkin Age reported that the company had ordered a steamboat for the use of the colony, which was located in Verdon Township in the northern part of Aitkin County. This boat, a thirty foot steam launch, arrived in Aitkin by rail early in June. It was named the “Remnica” for the Finnish goddess of spring. It was launched about the middle of June and

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left immediately for the colony up the river. In spite of its relatively small size, the boat had too much draft, and in 1904 it was sold to a logging company and transported to Lake Mille Lacs. Even there it proved to have been a “good deal of a Jonah,” and it was finally shipped to International Falls for use on Rainy River.\textsuperscript{25}

To replace the “Remnica,” the Finnish Colonization Company took over a small steamer which had been built by George Taylor of Grand Rapids. Like an earlier boat, it was called the “City of Aitkin.” The Aitkin Age for April 21, 1903, announced that “Geo. Taylor’s ‘City of Aitkin’ is expected down river at any time and the machinery which is here will be put in her.” Notice of the boat’s contract with the colonization company appeared in the same paper on July 14. On August 2, 1904, the Age reported that “Geo. Taylor, of steamboat fame, has his small boat at one of the Swan River bridges loaded to go up river, and is taking action against the logging company for obstructing the stream.” The outcome of the controversy was not reported. This seems to be the last reference to the boat, which evidently played only a small part in river transportation.

The “Irene” and others made regular trips in 1904 and 1905, carrying 2,000 and 660 tons of freight and 1,300 and 2,840 passengers in each year respectively. The reduction in freight in 1905 may be accounted for by the serious flood conditions that year.\textsuperscript{24}

THE “ATLAS,” a steam-driven barge capable of carrying four hundred tons of cargo, was built in 1905 by E. A. Cyde, who for some years operated a stave mill in Aitkin. Because of flood conditions, the boat made only one trip to Sandy Lake that season. The “Atlas” was too big and unwieldy to be satisfactory for general river traffic, and it was finally reduced in size and used only to haul lumber for a stave mill. It continued in service through 1909.\textsuperscript{25}

From 1906 through 1908 the “Irene” carried the bulk of shipments up the Mississippi and established records for the number of passengers and the amount of freight carried—fifty-five hundred passengers in 1906 and six thousand tons of freight in 1907. With business so good and with every prospect that it would continue, the Mississippi Transportation Company began in 1907 to build another steamer. This boat, named the “Oriole,” was not launched until 1908. Its deck measured a hundred and five feet in length, and it had a twenty-two foot beam and a sixteen foot boiler.

The “Oriole” started regular service in August, 1908, and with the “Irene” it carried fifteen hundred tons of freight and seventeen hundred passengers that year. The “Irene,” however, was approaching the end of its career. In May, 1908, it sank from overloading at the Verdon landing. Within a few days it had been raised and had resumed its regular run. In the spring of 1909 it again sank at its Aitkin dock, and it was then hauled up on land and dismantled. In 1909 and 1910 the “Oriole” operated alone. At the close of navigation in 1910, the boat was purchased by the government to be used as a dredge and snag boat.\textsuperscript{26}

The “Oriole” continued to operate in these capacities through the season of 1918. Then the machinery was removed and

\textsuperscript{24} Aitkin Age, June 9, 1903; September 29, 1908.


\textsuperscript{26} Aitkin Age, June 20, 1905; April 17, 1906; October 8, 1907; September 1, 1908.

\textsuperscript{26} 60 Congress, 1 session, House Executive Documents, no. 26, pt. 2, p. 1584; 60 Congress, 2 session, House Executive Documents, no. 1052, pt. 2, p. 1654; 61 Congress, 2 session, House Executive Documents, no. 111, pt. 2, p. 1646 (serials 5284, 5432, 5727); Aitkin Age, March 24, May 19, 1908; July 20, 1909.

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placed in storage at the Sandy Lake dam, with the recommendation that it be sold. The hull was said to be in such poor condition that it would have to be rebuilt if it were to be used again. The condemned craft was purchased by George Mattoon, who had opened a tourist resort on the west shore of Sandy Lake about a mile south of the government dam. Mattoon towed the old boat to his resort and dragged it up on the beach, where it was named “The Ark” and used as a summer hotel until about 1941.

In 1910 the Soo Line branch which extends northward through Aitkin County and crosses the Mississippi at the point where Palisade now stands was completed. The construction of a railroad bridge over the river there created a new hazard to navigation and compelled the owners of the “Oriole” to have its smokestacks hinged so that the boat could pass under the bridge. After a townsite was laid out near the crossing and a railway station was built, a good deal of river business in the transportation of farm supplies and products was cut off.27

WHETHER THE MISSISSIPPI Transportation Company would care to continue in business was questioned by the Aitkin Age on February 21, 1911. If it did not, it would “no doubt, cause a number of settlers to put on gasoline launches for the convenience of themselves and their neighbors,” the paper suggested. By 1915 “about 20 gasoline launches” were said to be operating on the upper river, despite the fact that Viebahn and Punteney continued in business.28 In 1911 they launched the last of the steamers on this northernmost navigable section of the Mississippi.

The new boat was the “Lee.” Parts of the old “Irene” were used in building it,

27 Aitkin Age, June 14, 1910; February 21, 1911.
28 64 Congress, 1 session, House Executive Documents, no. 91, pt. 2, p. 2790 (serial 6973).

REMAINS of the steamboat landing at the mouth of the Sandy River, July, 1949
though it was smaller, with only one main deck. This enabled it to clear the bridge at Palisade. The *Aitkin Age* of May 23, 1911, described the “Lee” as follows: “The boat is a handsome one—in fact the handsomest boat that has been on the run—although not as large as the old Oriole.... The freight deck is arranged as before but above, the cabin and pilot house is combined in one pleasant room entirely surrounded by glass windows which slide open. It can be a sun parlor or an open cabin according to weather.” The name “Lee,” chosen by Captain Viebahn, was his wife’s maiden name.

During its first year on the river, 1911, it carried 1,500 tons of freight and 1,050 passengers. Freight and passenger business decreased rapidly until in 1920 an all-time low of sixty tons of freight and seventy-five passengers was recorded. By that time the boat had passed into the hands of Marcus Nelson, a prominent lumberman of the area, who used it chiefly in connection with log drives down Prairie River and across Sandy Lake.

About 1920–21 the “Lee” sank near Gyde’s mill at the mouth of Mud River. It was later raised and stripped to the hull, which was repaired and towed upstream by Harry Riggs to be operated as a ferry in Verdon Township. It did not operate very long and eventually the hull of the “Lee” was left to rot away on the river bank.

Today where the waters of the Sandy River join those of the Mississippi may be seen a pile of boulders cribbed in by rolling logs—all that is left of an old steamboat landing. Just a few rods away on a narrow ridge between the two streams may be seen a group of depressions which were once cellars underneath the buildings of the American Fur Company post erected there in the 1820’s. These two physical features are reminders of two phases of Minnesota’s industrial life—steamboating and the fur trade—now merely parts of the state’s storied past.

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**A Note on Our New Format**

A TWO-COLUMN enlarged type page, coated paper, and pictures are only the more obvious features of our new format, which involved a complete redesigning of our quarterly. The text is set in a new type face, Caledonia, which is distinguished both by reading ease and beauty of design. For the headings, a handsome face known as Bulmer is used.

In planning the new format, we were fortunate in having the help of experts. A well-known Minneapolis typographer, Frank Kofron, designed the pictorial cover, planned the inside and back cover pages, and supervised the layout and type style throughout. We take pride in the fact that he is entering our cover in a display of the work of members of the Twin City Society of Artists and Art Directors at the Dayton Company’s store, opening on April 14.

In implementing the new design, Irving Kreidberg played a major role. He is connected with the North Central Publishing Company of St. Paul, which prints the quarterly.

We have endeavored to improve our magazine without sacrificing the high standards of scholarship and editing that have long characterized it. The success of the new design can be measured only by your reaction. Let us know what you think of it. We are eager to hear from you. Ed.

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*THE PICTURES on pages 7 and 10 were obtained by the author from the *Aitkin Age*; that on page 13 was furnished by a daughter of William Byerla, a member of the "Irene’s" crew; that on page 15 came from Mrs. Marcus Nelson, whose husband once owned the "Lee"; and the view on page 18 was photographed by Evan A. Hart.*