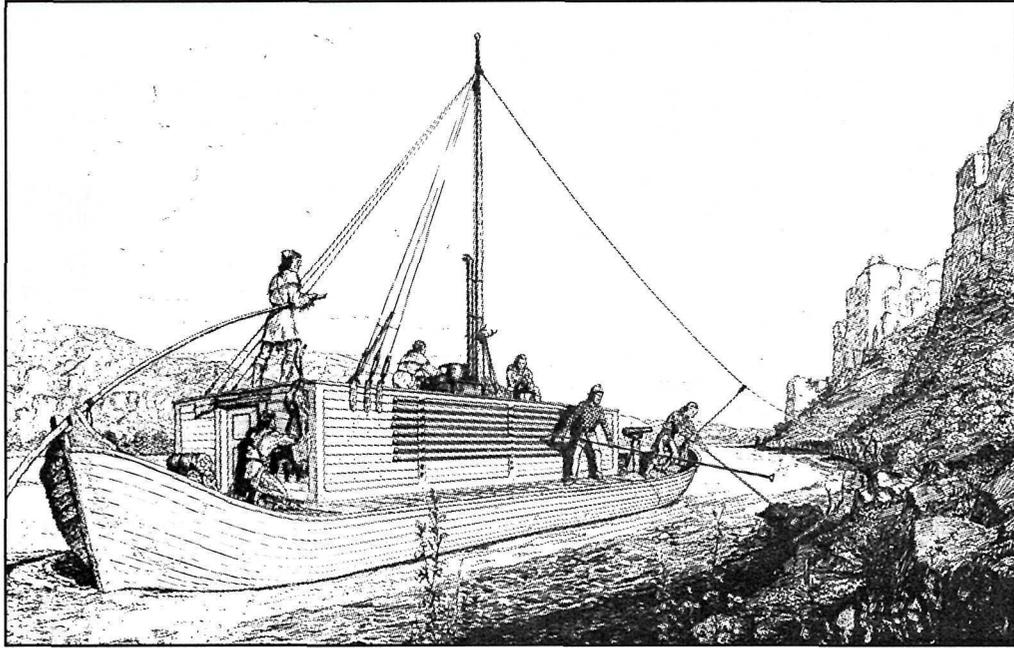


Fort Union Trading Post

RIVER TRANSPORTATION



Keelboat on the Missouri River

“I HAVE SEEN NOTHING MORE FRIGHTFUL...”

So recorded Father Jacques Marquette upon seeing the Missouri's discharge into the Mississippi in 1673. Marquette and Louis Joliet were probably the first white men to see the Missouri River. The mighty Missouri is 2,950 miles long and drains a watershed of 580,000 square miles. It is a chief tributary of the Mississippi River. The Missouri was the water highway connecting St. Louis and Fort Union, a distance of 1800 miles.

KEELBOAT PERIOD

Keelboats were once the principal craft conveying trade goods up river and cargoes of furs down river. Such boats averaged sixty feet long, eighteen feet wide, with a five foot cabin above the deck and cost \$2,500 to build. Keelboats featured a sharp bow and stern, with a swivel gun mounted on the bow for protection. These boats each carried twenty tons of trade goods and were pulled, poled, or rowed up the Missouri.

A keelboat crew consisted of a **patron** or captain, **bosseman** or assistant patron, and twenty **voyageurs** who literally pulled the boat up river. Additional passengers might include hunters and trappers en route to the mountains. The entire complement was termed a **Fur Trade Brigade**. The voyageurs pulled the keelboat along by means of a 300-yard **cordell** rope attached to the upper portion of the boat's mast. The patron kept the boat in

the channel, while the bosseman shouted orders and the voyageurs pulled at the rate of fifteen miles per day. It took a keelboat crew six months to travel from St. Louis to Fort Union, and an additional forty days to Fort McKenzie, located on the Missouri River in west-central Montana. The trip consumed one boating season. The introduction of steamboats serving the up-river posts was initiated in 1832 by the American Fur Company to cut the high costs of transporting goods by labor-intensive keelboats.

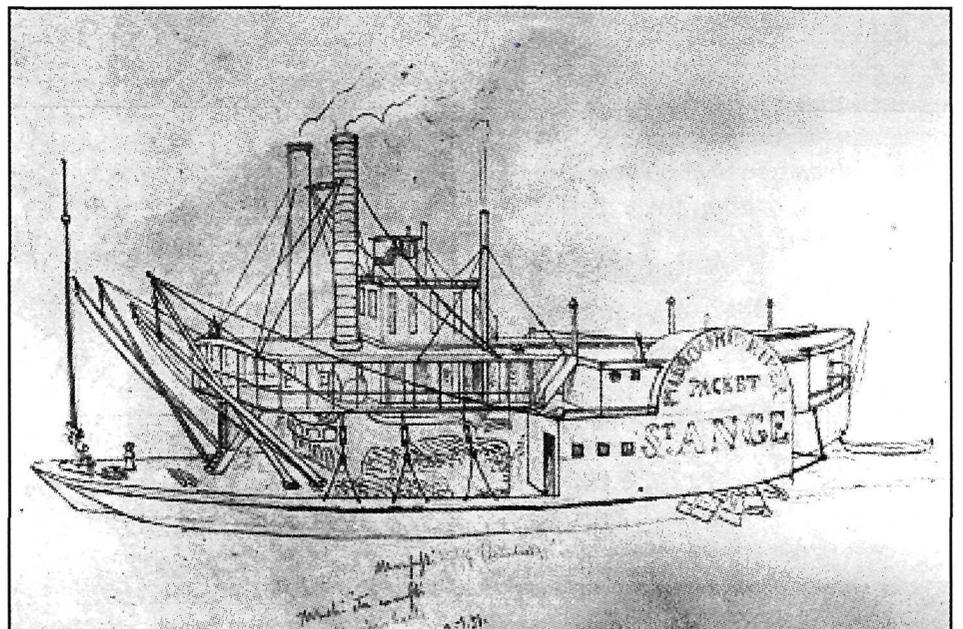
BUILT FOR A ONE-WAY TRIP

Large posts such as Fort Union had **chantiers** or boat yards for the construction of mackinaw boats. Constructed of two-inch cottonwood planks, typical mackinaws

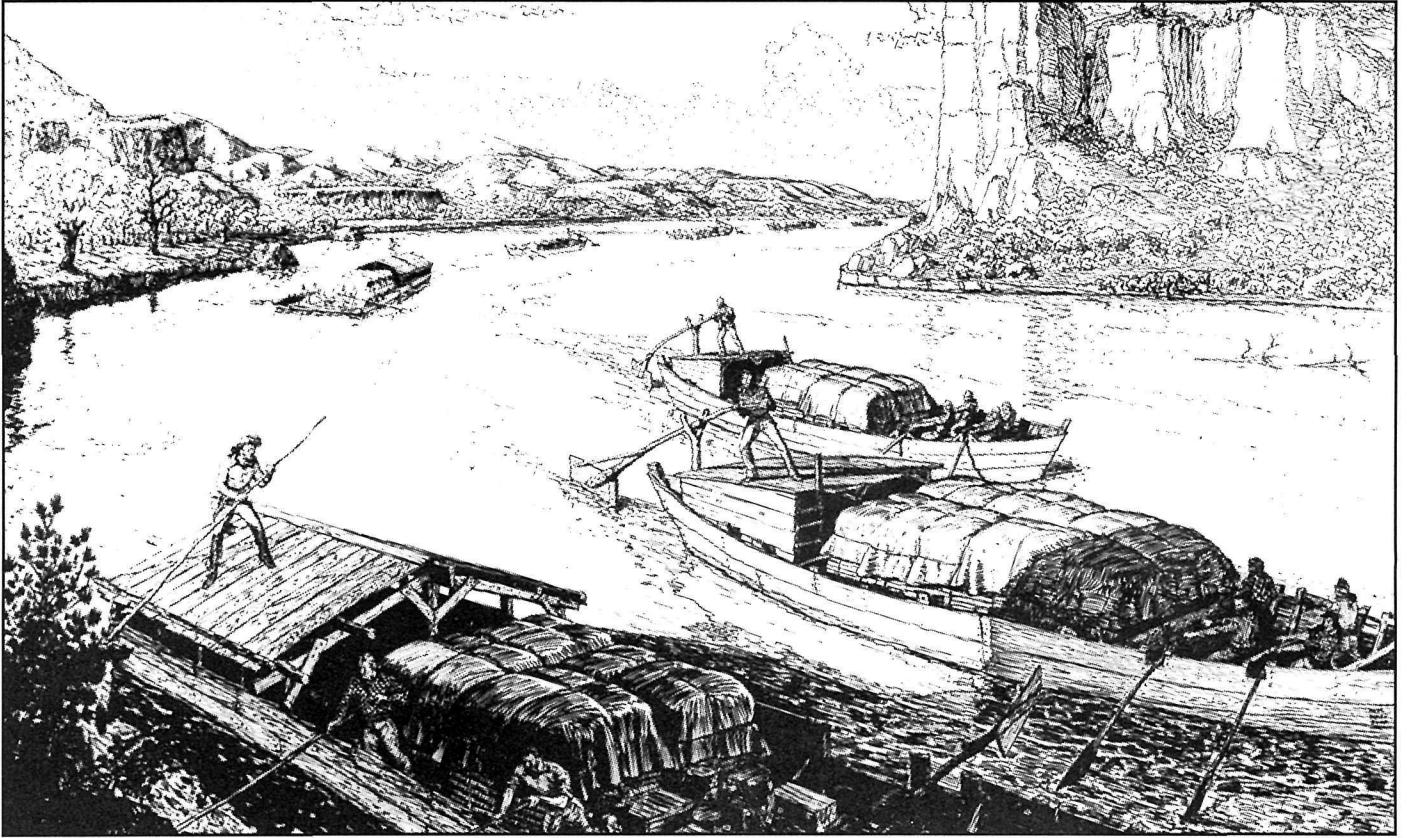
were fifty feet long and nine feet wide, with three-foot gunwales; they drew thirty inches. Mackinaws were the cheapest down stream transportation available since steamboats usually could not carry all the furs gathered at the forts. They were built for a one-way trip. A mackinaw could carry 300 packs of furs covered with buffalo skins to provide watertight protection. A mackinaw crew consisted of a steersman plus five men. Mackinaws traveled in fleets of six to twelve boats for protection and assistance and averaged 100 river miles per day.

ERA OF STEAMBOATS

Fort Union was an active fur trading post for thirty-nine years (1828-1867). Steamboats came to or passed by for thirty-five of those



Rudolph F. Kurz's 1851 sketch of the *St. Ange*.



Mackinaw boats took furs, robes and pelts downriver to St. Louis warehouses, where they were then sent on to New York and European markets.

years. The fort was located on the north bank of the Missouri River, some three miles above the mouth of the Yellowstone River. Built chiefly for the Assiniboine Indian trade, Fort Union rapidly became a major establishment under the personal direction of Bourgeois Kenneth McKenzie. The goods reaping riches for the American Fur Company were dependent upon the river highway and reliable boat transportation.

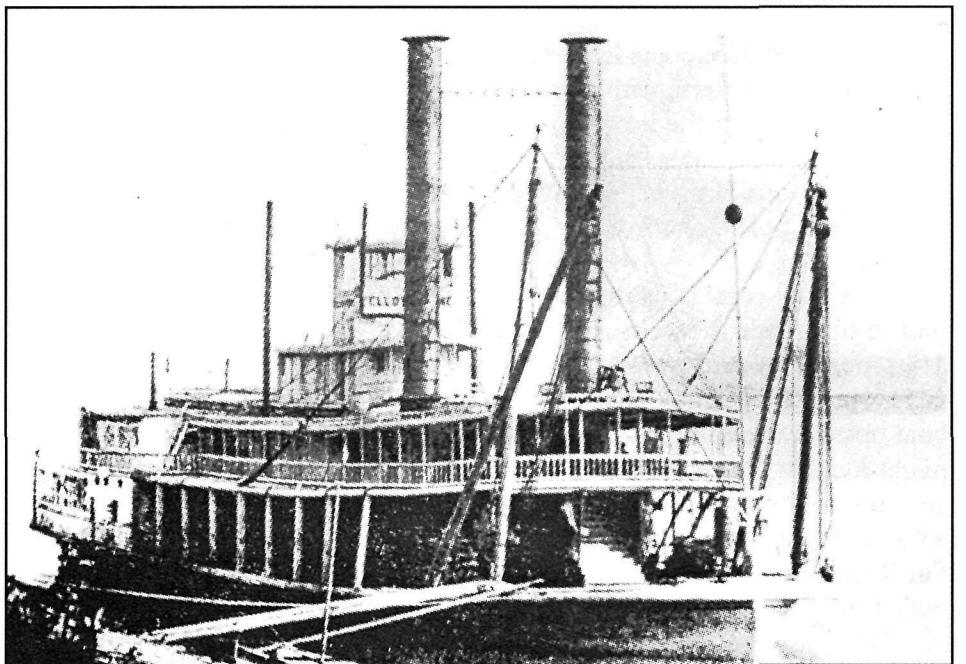
In a move to improve transportation to its upper river posts and to cut the costs of keelboats, the American Fur Company built the *Yellow Stone* during the winter of 1830-1831. The idea of bringing a steamboat 1800 miles up the Missouri to Fort Union is credited to Kenneth McKenzie, the bourgeois and head of the Upper Missouri Outfit (U.M.O.), headquartered at Fort Union. Through long experience in the fur trade, he realized that Missouri River steamboat transportation could be used to the advantage of the American Fur Company and at the expense of its competitors.

The *Yellow Stone* departed St. Louis in April 1831 on its pioneering voyage, but due to the inexperience of its captain in navigating the upper Missouri, the boat reached only Fort Tecumseh, in present day South Dakota. In 1832 the *Yellow Stone* again departed St. Louis in March to take advantage of the upper river's "June Rise." Amid

great jubilation the *Yellow Stone* reached Fort Union on June 16, 1832.

For the next twenty-seven years, Fort Union was the effective head of navigation of the Missouri River. The arrival of the annual steamboat was cause for great celebration among the upper Missouri forts. Each successive year after 1832, the American Fur Company sent one steamboat per year to Fort Union. This single boat per year became two steamboats in the 1850s, owing to competitive pressures and lucrative government contracts required by Indian treaties. In 1859, the American Fur Company's *Chippewa* became the first boat to reach Brule Bottom just below Fort

Benton. From 1860 to the abandonment of Fort Union in 1867, Fort Benton became the final head of steam navigation on the great Missouri.



Shallow draft steamboats made navigation of the fickle Missouri possible.