



Shipwrecks in South Dakota

Highway of the Plains

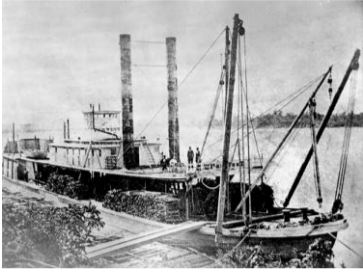


Photo: Dakota Terr. Museum

The *Far West*

Long before there were roads in this part of the country, the Missouri River offered travelers an easier route into the interior of the continent. Soldiers, settlers, and adventurers traveled up and down by canoes, keelboats and steamboats. Following the great Montana gold rush of 1863, steamboat traffic increased dramatically. Adding steamboats to the landscape changed every aspect of life along the river. Commerce was soon tied to the yearly arrival of steamers that brought not only new products but also news from the states, emigrants, and long-absent family members.

Danger Ahead

Steamboats also brought a new era of comfort to the river. Yet they found it hard going on the treacherous Missouri, just as did other water craft. Builders designed boats specifically for travel on the shallow Missouri: flat hulled with hardly a keel, drawing at most four feet of water and powerful engines to counter the river's strong current. Some wags claimed that these sternwheelers could "float on a head of beer." The mighty Missouri River didn't give in gracefully to those who chose to travel her waters. Navigating the river meant hard work and danger at every turn. Captains and crews

quickly learned to watch for danger signs in the river's swirling waters. Those who learned to read the river—its snags, sandbars, currents, and shallows—could bring their boats home safely. Those who didn't faced loss, ruin and death. More traffic meant both increased economic and commercial development along the river. For example, as Sioux City grew so did other river towns such as Yankton, Bismarck, and Fort Benton. Growth along the river also contributed to an increased number of steamboat disasters as the frequency of travel increased and the number of boats on the river escalated.

The River's Rise and Fall



The ice gorge of 1881 at Yankton

Photo by S.J. Morrow, Dakota Terr. Museum collection

Given such formidable conditions, the fact that steamboats made it up the Big Muddy was an amazing feat. The odds did not favor steamboats or their operators. The worst hazards steamboats faced were the products of nature and most were, for many years, completely uncontrollable. By far the greatest impediment to using the river successfully as a highway was the river itself. Few who traveled on the Missouri failed to notice two very important things.

First, the river was shallow much of the year. The Missouri normally experienced two annual rises, one in spring and the other in early summer. By far, the most famous or infamous, of the spring rises occurred in 1881, when in late March a massive accumulation of miniature icebergs and water destroyed much of the Yankton riverfront and smashed steamboats tied up for the winter. The flood demolished the *Western*, and battered the *Butte*, the *Helena (II)*, and the *Black Hills*. The icy waters lifted the *Peninah (No.2)*, the *Nellie Peck* and the ferryboat *Livingston* out of the river bed and dumped them on shore, the *Nellie* coming to rest on the railroad tracks. From this horrific spring rise

Yankton's steamboat industry never recovered. (All but the *Western* were repaired and returned to service, though on other stretches of the river.) After the summer rise, the depth of the river's main channel, or *thalweg*, began to drop. During the summer and into autumn, the river level often fell so low in reaches that only boats drawing a few inches of water were able to run. Low water was the downfall of river navigation and could spell disaster. A grounded boat could continue on after it became free for damage seldom resulted. Yet a grounded boat could sink if the river bottom was uneven and the boat hard aground—the combination would cause the hull to sag and break in two. Hulls were tough but not indestructible.

Second only to the erratic rise and fall of the water level in the river was the phenomenon of the river never being in the same place twice. The Missouri constantly shifted, eroding one bank while at the same time depositing sediment on the opposite bank, thereby creating new land. Every riverboat pilot was a sort of high stakes gambler, betting against a set of forces which he could neither control nor predict.

Snags



Cartoon of a riverboat wreck from the 1800s.

By far the greatest obstacle that the river offered was snags. The erosive power of the river filled the channel with downed trees which eventually settled on the river bottom becoming snags. They were deadly and the most dreaded of the river's obstructions. A snag lying with its head downstream was commonly known as a "sawyer" from the slow bobbing or sawing motion given it by the action of the current. Some snags, bobbing or not, were barely visible to even a superbly experienced pilot. A ripple at the water's surface

often spoke of the trouble lying just beneath the water's surface, but many able pilots lost boats to unseen snags.

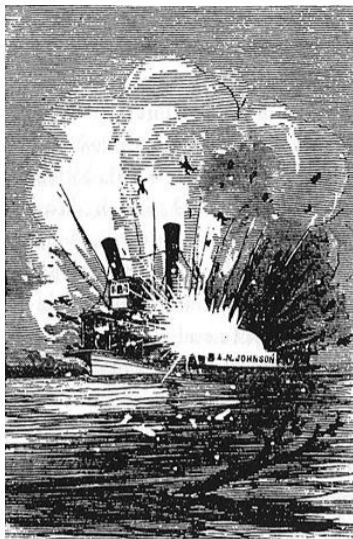
Snags could rip open the hull of a boat. A passenger on the *Tropic* recalled in 1857 when the snag struck the steamer that it "... penetrated her hull, pierced through the deck, pantry, and two state rooms, and came out at the hurricane roof, breaking the main pipe, deluging the cabin with hot steam, killing an engineer and leaving the

wretched ship impaled like a fly upon a needle.”

During an 1846 trip back down the Missouri River from Westport (now Kansas City), Francis Parkman wrote that when “. . . we descended in the autumn it [the river] was fallen very low and all the secrets of its treacherous shallows were

exposed to view. It was frightful to see the dead and broken trees, thick-set as a military *abatis*, firmly imbedded in the sand, and all pointing down stream ready to impale an unhappy steamboat that in high water should pass over them.”

Fire and Ice



From Steamboat Directory, J. T. Lloyd, 1856

Wind, fog, rain, and darkness could cover up the warnings of an impending collision. The river’s ever-changing channel required constant vigilance to make sure the boat did not become grounded on a sandbar that wasn’t there on the previous trip.

Added to the hazards of snags were the summer storms like the tornado that sank the *Peninah* in Yankton in mid-April 1875, as well as the unpredictability of the tribes and buffalo herds. Fire was another danger and fire from boiler explosions was one of the deadliest risks in river travel. Regardless of the cause, fire almost always spelled disaster for steamers. When a critical component on a boiler failed there was no warning—only concussion, flame, scalding water, and searing steam. Such was the fate of the *Leodora*; it went aground at Elk Point, Dakota Territory, and burned on May 21, 1866. The *Antelope* suffered a similar fate on April 12, 1869, about 20 miles above Yankton and with the loss of two lives.

Ice floes, and not just from a spring rise, also

were hazards to be avoided at all costs. The Upper Missouri froze solid in winter. A quickly-forming ice sheet sank the *Imperial* in late 1867 near the same location where the *Antelope* would catch fire and sink two years hence. Ice cut down the *F. Y. Batchelor* and the *Josephine*, perhaps the longest-running steamer on the Missouri, two days apart at Running Water, South Dakota, in early March 1907.

Traveling the Missouri River was a day-to-day struggle, one never to be taken lightly. Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet, a Jesuit missionary who traveled extensively, remarked about the turbulent river: “I will only remind you that steam navigation on the Missouri is one of the most dangerous things a man can undertake. I fear the sea but all the storms and other unpleasant things I have experienced in four different ocean voyages did not inspire me with so much terror as the navigation of the somber, treacherous, muddy Missouri.”

Explosion of the A. N. Johnson on the Ohio River in 1847

Skeletons of the Past



Captain and Pilot Grant Marsh never lost a boat on the Missouri in nearly 50 years of navigation.

Photo from *Conquest of the Missouri*, J.M. Hanson, 1909.

Operating steamboats on the Upper Missouri was a profitable business and the cost of building a boat could be recovered in just two or three trips. Huge profits carried huge risks; by 1897, at least sixteen steamboats had wrecked between Sioux City and Fort Randall, victims of snags, boiler explosions, ice floes, and groundings. Many of these wrecks were never salvaged.

With the construction of railroads, travel to the western territories became easier and more reliable. Eventually profits from steamboats dropped so much that they could no longer operate. Remains of these remarkable riverboats still lie on and under the sandy shoals of the Missouri, a part of American history for all to enjoy.

One of these steamboat remains reappeared in the spring of 2004 during a period of low river levels. They are possibly from the *North Alabama* which sank on October 27, 1870. At that time she was bound from Sioux City to the Yellowstone country loaded with flour and whiskey when she hit a snag and sank at Bow River Bend between Yankton and Vermillion.

Originally named the *Virginia Barton*, she served with the US Army during the Civil War. Her owners sold her in 1866, at which time she was renamed *North Alabama*. Captain Grant Marsh piloted her in 1869 on a late season trip from Sioux City to Fort Buford to deliver fresh vegetables and supplies to the various forts. Captain Jim McGarrak was her pilot when she snagged and sank on that late October 1870 day. Both the deck and inner hull cargo were recovered. The wreck caused the river channel to change, with sand soon completely covering it. Another channel change exposed the wreck on July 21, 1906; shortly thereafter the channel moved again and the remains disappeared once more.



The *North Alabama* in 2005

NPS photo

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