

The Ohio River, Its Influence on the Development of Indiana

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From the time of the first appearance of white men west of the Allegheny mountains, the Ohio river became an important highway to the vast inland territory now known as the central west. The military expeditions of George Rogers Clark, and Mad Anthony Wayne, whose conquests gained and held this great territory for the United States, were made possible by the broad waterway that carried them to the heart of the disputed country. And down this stream, flowing ever westward, came as in an endless pageant, the rafts, flat boats and keel boats of the pioneer settlers.

For a distance by river of three hundred and eighty miles the Ohio forms the southern boundary of what is now the state of Indiana, and it was, in the days when this territory was being settled and developed, the most important means of transportation from the east.

Reference to the traffic on the river in those days is made in the journal of Andrew Elliott, commissioner of the United States for determining the boundary between this country and Florida, then a possession of his Catholic Majesty the King of Spain. Mr. Elliott left Pittsburgh in the fall of 1796 with two keel boats and two flat bottomed or Kentucky boats. The beauty of the river and the fertility of the country filled him with delight. He described the trade then carried on by river to New Orleans and noted the important fact that while the settlers possessed ample raw materials, and could export their produce with ease, their imports were attended with great difficulty, risk, and expense. This difficulty was caused by the immense labor necessary to work a boat upstream, and it continued as a serious handicap to the growing traffic of the western country until the days of the steamboat.

Yet in the early days an amazing volume of transportation was carried on the river in flat boats and keel boats. The flat boat, a type that seems to have originated in the Ohio val-

ley, was the usual boat of the emigrants. It had a flat bottom and was square at each end. The sides were enclosed with heavy planks and over all was a flat roof or deck. Such a boat was in fact a floating enclosure that could be used as a cabin, fortress, barn and store house and was well suited for the task of transporting the family of an emigrant, together with his live stock, household goods, tools and other equipment. The sides of the earlier boats were heavily reinforced, as a protection from rifle fire from the Indians who lurked along the shore. They floated with the current and were steered from the end with a long oar, or sweep, fixed on a pivot.

Boats intended for use on the Ohio were often known as "Kentucky Boats," while more substantial boats, known as "New Orleans Boats" were built for the longer journey down the Mississippi. The sawed timber of which these boats were made became of great value as they went on down the river where there were no saw mills, and many a pioneer built his cabin from the lumber of the boat that had brought him and his family to their new location.

A river guide called the *Navigator*, printed in 1810, gave the following information for those coming to the West:

The principal places where families and merchants stop to prepare for embarkation, are Brownsville (or Redstone), Pittsburgh, and Wheeling. There are people in each of those places that make it their business to accommodate strangers descending the river, with every article they may want, either in provisions, farming utensils, boats or other crafts, at a cheap and reasonable price.

Their boats are generally made well and strong, the price of which varies according to their make, length, and strength. One convenient for a family, between 30 and 40 feet in length, costs from 1 dollar to 1 dollar and 25 cents per foot, making perhaps 35 dollars for a comfortable family boat, well boarded up on the sides, and roofed to within seven or eight feet of the bow. Exclusive of this expense, is the price of a cable, pump, and fire place, perhaps ten dollars.

It was by flat-boats that the produce of the settlers was floated to market. Hundreds of them were loaded every year and sent down to the great port of New Orleans. Lawrenceburg was the shipping point for much of the farm produce of southeastern Indiana. From Aurora, with its excellent harbor and landing, many boats left each season. And on down the river, from each settlement on the Indiana and Kentucky

shores, and from the streams running back into the interior, flat boats, whose total numbered many hundreds, left each spring for the South. Prices everywhere were governed by the New Orleans market.

With the growth of traffic on the river a number of companies were organized to write insurance on the boats and their cargoes. Among those in Indiana were the Madison Insurance Company organized in 1831 and the Rising Sun Insurance Company organized a few years later. The first policy of the Rising Sun Company was on a flat boat about to start on a trading voyage down the Ohio and Mississippi. The cargo, which consisted of onions, apples, potatoes, cider and whiskey, was insured until safe arrival at New Orleans. At Jeffersonville a company insured boats while going over the falls.

After reaching New Orleans and selling boats and cargoes, the boatmen would generally return overland by the Natchez trail, some on horseback, others afoot, traveling usually in groups to defend themselves against bandits who infested the way.

There was danger from outlaws on the river as well as on land. Bands of pirates operated on the lower Ohio. A cavern known as Cave-in-Rock on the Illinois shore was headquarters for a gang of fifty or more under the leadership of a bandit named Wilson. Their favorite plan was to capture a flat-boat laden for the lower river, murder the crew and take the boat on down to market themselves. For a number of years these operations went on unsuspected, as the disappearance of a boat and crew could easily be accounted for by the dangers of navigation. Finally, their methods being discovered, and a price set on Wilson's head, he was killed by one of his own men to gain the reward. It is said on good authority that about sixty skeletons were found in a room of his cavern, which gave evidence of the extent of this career of betrayal and murder.

For traffic up the river, keel boats and barges were used. The keel boat was pointed at each end, and had narrow platforms on which the boatmen moved along when they worked the boat upstream with poles. Oars, sails, poles and the tow line, or cordelle, were all used in a trip upstream, one method

being abandoned for another as conditions changed at each bend in the river.

In his recollections of these days, published in the *Western Pilot*, Samuel Cummings says:

The occupation of a boatman was more calculated to destroy the constitution, and to shorten life than any other business. In ascending the river, it was a continued series of toil, rendered more irksome by the snail-like rate at which they moved.

Notwithstanding this, the boatman's life had charms as irresistible as those presented by the stage. Sons abandoned the comfortable farms of their fathers, and apprentices fled from the service of their masters. There was a captivation in the idea of "Going down the river"; and the youthful boatman who had "pushed a keel" from New Orleans felt all the pride of a young merchant, after his first voyage to a foreign port.

On board the boats thus navigated, merchants entrusted valuable cargoes, without insurance, and with no other guarantee than the receipt of the steersman. The confidence so reposed was seldom abused.

A line of keel boats ran from Cincinnati to Marietta as early as 1794 and about fifteen years later a writer spoke of the line from Cincinnati to New Orleans, whose boats returned with cargoes of "sugar, coffee, rice, hides, wines and rums, dry goods of various kinds, and cotton from Natchez."

These boats had a capacity of about 700 barrels of freight. A crew of nine men could conduct one down to New Orleans in about five weeks, but the return trip took three or four months and required about thirty men.

Among other articles mentioned in the records of imports brought up the river in those early days, were shipments of Spanish wool, indigo, log wood and quicksilver. Truly a list suggestive of high adventure and romance.

And the record of shipments down the river is of equal interest. The books of the pilot at the Ohio falls show that 197 flat boats, and fourteen keel boats descended in the two months before the close of navigation in January, 1811. Beside the usual cargoes of flour, pork, corn, tobacco and other farm produce, these boats carried to the expectant southland no less than twenty-seven hundred barrels of whiskey, wine and brandy, eight hundred and seventeen hams of venison, and over fourteen thousand tame fowls. Among other considerable items of their cargoes were slaves, ginseng, pine and

cherry plank, ironware, cabinet work and seneca oil. This seneca oil was the crude oil found floating on oil creek, a tributary of the Allegheny. It was thought to be efficient in the treatment of rheumatism.

In addition to the boats trading with the gulf ports there were many loaded at the headwaters of the Ohio, with dry goods, hardware and other articles to supply the settlements in Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky. These floating general stores, usually in charge of one or two men, who were proprietors, clerks and crew, did a prosperous business. At the end of the voyage, which took about three months, the traders would sell their boat and walk back, with enlarged experience in the needs of the growing river towns, to start another venture.

No chronicle of the river at that time would be complete without a reference to the ocean rigged vessels launched on the upper Ohio. Perhaps the first was the brig, St. Clair, built at Marietta, which cleared in May, 1800, with a cargo of flour and pork for Havanna. The brig, Dean, launched in 1806, made a voyage from Pittsburgh to the Mediterranean. At Leghorn the customs officer objected to her papers on the ground that no such port as Pittsburgh was in existence.

At least a dozen other ships, brigs, and schooners built on the upper river are listed by Zadok Cramer in his quaint and interesting river guide. For a time it was thought that a great shipbuilding industry would be developed, but the falls at Louisville proved a most discouraging obstacle, and after several ships had been sunk at that point the industry was abandoned.

It had not been expected that these sailing vessels would be used for river traffic. That was confined to flat boats and keel boats, and because of the tedious trip upstream their cargoes were limited to the most essential things.

New settlers were coming to this fertile western country and opening farms that produced abundantly, but they were forced to live in a comparatively primitive way because of the difficulty in exchanging their surplus produce in the markets of the south and east. It has always been true that the development of a country is limited by the capacity of its transportation system and had not these difficulties been overcome, the Ohio valley would still be handicapped in the same way as are

Siberia and the interior of China. Such was the situation at the time the development of the steamboat made possible an adequate method for exchanging their commodities in the markets of the world.

It was in 1807 that Robert Fulton, and his patron and co-worker, Robert Livingston, after many years of experiment, launched the *Clermont*, a boat that successfully made the trip up the Hudson from New York to Albany, propelled by the power of steam. For having built a boat that would attain a speed of four miles an hour under its own power, the legislature of New York granted them the exclusive right to steam navigation on the waters of that state for a period of twenty years.

They soon planned to take a more complete advantage of their remarkable achievement. To extend their monopoly to the great rivers of the west, the Ohio Steamboat Navigation Company was formed, and under the direction of Nicholas Roosevelt, one of the incorporators, work was begun at Pittsburgh on a steamer, the *New Orleans*. This, the first steamboat on the western rivers, was launched in 1811. It had a capacity of one hundred tons and was equipped with two masts, it being thought that the use of sails would be necessary at times.

Naturally enough there had been much doubt as to whether such boats would be successful. The editor of the *Navigator* made the following noncommittal comment:

There is now on foot a new mode of navigating our Western waters, particularly the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. This is with boats propelled by the power of steam.

It will be a novel sight, and as pleasing as novel to see a huge boat working her way up the windings of the Ohio, without the appearance of sail, oar, pole, or any manual labor about her—moving within the secrets of her own wonderful mechanism, and propelled by power undiscoverable.

In the fall of 1811 the new steamboat made the trip down the river from Pittsburgh to New Orleans, her time being fourteen days. It is easy to understand the excitement and enthusiasm with which the boat was received. Word of her coming spread ahead, and at every town and settlement the whole population turned out to welcome the wonderful craft.

But the New Orleans stayed on the lower Mississippi and it was several years before men were to see "a boat, working her way up the Ohio by her own wonderful mechanism."

Within the next few years several other boats were built. One, the *Enterprise*, built by D. French at Brownsville, Pa., conveyed a cargo of military supplies from Pittsburgh to New Orleans in the winter of 1814 and was used by General Jackson in military service for several months. The following spring she returned to Louisville, this being the first time that a steamboat had made the return trip. However, this was during a time of high water when the boat could travel through cut-offs, and over inundated fields where there was little current.

It was not until the appearance of the steamboat *Washington*, in 1816, that it was demonstrated that boats could regularly ascend these rivers under their own power. This boat, built at Wheeling, under the direction of Captain Henry Shreve, contained many improvements over the earlier boats. After she had made two trips from the falls at Louisville to New Orleans and return, all doubts as to the possibility of steam navigation on the western rivers were dispelled. Fulton and Livingston who claimed a monopoly on this use of steam attached the *Washington* at New Orleans, but their claim was resisted by Captain Shreve, and the court gave a decision in his favor.

Thus began a new epoch in the development of the central west which, with the growth of the steamboat industry, at last had an adequate means of transportation. The steamboat was carried to its highest degree of perfection on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and was a means of making the country west of the Allegheny mountains one of the most prosperous regions in the world.

The new state of Indiana had a full share in this prosperity. Ship yards were started, wharfs and landing places were built, wood yards were established, and for over half a century the steamboat was a dominating influence in the life of the river counties.

In 1817 the editor of the *Emigrant's Guide* said that "the southern and much more valuable part of Indiana" was settling with much rapidity. There was, indeed, a remarkable

increase in population, which from 24,000 in 1810 grew to nearly three hundred and fifty thousand by 1830.

Writing of traffic on the river in the thirties Mr. W. G. Lyford reported over three hundred and fifty steamboats in service. Most of these were freight boats, but nearly all would carry passengers. The fare for cabin passengers, including state room and meals, was then about three cents a mile. Deck passengers, furnishing their own provisions, and helping load wood for fuel, paid about one-fourth this amount. A galley, or cook stove, was provided on the lower deck for their use.

A striking evidence of the immense river traffic at that time is given by Mr. A. B. Hulbert in his book, *The Ohio River*, in which we find that by 1834 the tonnage of the boats on the Ohio and Mississippi was larger than that of the British Empire, or of the entire Atlantic seaboard. This was only eighteen years after it had been demonstrated that a steamboat could ascend the rivers, and shows how amazing had been the growth of the western country when given an adequate way of carrying its merchandise.

In 1818 the United States mail line, built the General Pike, the first boat exclusively for passengers. This boat, which ran from Cincinnati to Louisville, stopped at all Indiana towns along the way. The first trip was made in one day and seven hours, which was thought to be, and was, a remarkable achievement. Forty years later boats of the same company, most of them built at Madison, made the trip daily in about nine hours. Among them were the Jacob Strader and Telegraph Number Three, which were among the finest boats ever built and did much to sustain the reputation of the boats of the western waters as being the best in the world. The description, floating palaces, as applied to such boats, was well deserved.

Because of the rapids at Louisville all boats were forced to stop there, except in times of high water, and transfer cargo and passengers. A canal was built around the rapids but as the boats increased in size it could not be used by the larger ones. To serve the lower river this same company placed a fleet in the trade between Louisville and St. Louis. It included such splendid boats as the Northerner, Southerner, Ben Franklin, and Highflyer. There may have been boys in these days,

in the river towns of southern Indiana, who did not know the name of the president of their country, but it is doubtful if there were any who did not know who was captain of each mail boat. Boats of this type were built for speed and ran on a regular schedule, in order to attract the passenger traffic and to secure the profitable government contract for carrying the mails. They took only the lighter forms of freight.

There were fifteen or twenty important shipping points on the Indiana shore listed in the river directories of that time, including such prosperous towns as Lawrenceburg, Aurora, Rising Sun, Madison, Jeffersonville, New Albany, Leavenworth, Rockport, Evansville and Mt. Vernon. Madison was then the most important commercial center in Indiana and continued to be for many years.

With so many boats on the river accidents were inevitable. There seem to have been more on the Mississippi, in proportion to the volume of traffic, than on the Ohio, and many a man ran on the river for years without seeing an accident of consequence, yet the list on either river is a lamentable one. Fire, collision, treacherous snags, and careless handling of the boilers were the usual causes.

At midnight in May, 1825, the steamboat *Mechanic*, that had been chartered to take General Lafayette and a distinguished company up the Ohio, struck a snag a few miles from Cannelton, Indiana, and soon sank. There was no loss of life, but in the confusion, General Lafayette, was thrown into the river and came near drowning. He was rescued by a deck hand, but lost most of his personal effects, including his carriage, clothing and eight thousand dollars in money.

The steamer *Moselle*, one of the finest boats on the river, was blown up near Cincinnati in April, 1838, less than a month after having been put into service. Her officers, eager to establish a reputation for the boat as the swiftest in America, had grown reckless in handling the boilers, with the result that all four exploded at once. Fragments of the boat were found on both the Ohio and Kentucky shores. Eighty-one persons were known to have been killed, and fifty-five were missing. Another disaster, never to be forgotten in southern Indiana, was caused by the collision of the *States* and the *America*, packets in the line from Madison to Cincinnati. The *States*

was cut nearly in two and soon was in flames. Many citizens of Madison lost their lives, the total death list being over one hundred. The Redstone, another Madison and Cincinnati packet, was destroyed by a boiler explosion, while making a trip against time, and seventeen lives were lost.

The ship yards on the Indiana shore were among the best known on the river. There were large yards at Madison, Jeffersonville and New Albany, and a number of boats were built at other places. Jeffersonville, at the head of the falls, and with one of the best harbors on the river, was an excellent location. The first steamer built there was the United States, launched in 1819. She had two separate engines, built in England, was capable of carrying three thousand bales of cotton, and was described at the time as "the finest merchant steamboat in the universe." In his history of Clark county Mr. Lewis C. Baird has a complete and valuable account of the different ship yards at Jeffersonville, the greatest of which were the Howard yards. During a period of sixty years over six hundred vessels were launched by these famous builders, a record not equalled by any plant on the western rivers. The James Howard, a side wheel steam boat, launched by them in October, 1870, was the largest inland steamboat ever built. This splendid boat was 318 feet in length, 54 feet beam and 3400 tonnage. It ran in the New Orleans and St. Louis trade and represented the highest type of construction ever attained in steamboat work.

Many of the finest boats on the river were built at Madison. In an interesting paper on "Steamboat Building at Madison," Mr. A. S. Chapman has recorded the rise and fall of the industry there. At one time hundreds of men were employed and the reputation of the yards for good design and good workmanship was nation wide.

The ship yards at New Albany were among the best in the country. Excellent timber for boat building was to be had there and the business developed rapidly. From 1830 to 1865 over three hundred steamers were launched at the New Albany yards, including such famous boats as the Eclipse, the Sultana, the Robert E. Lee, and many others, that for speed, comfort and luxury were the peers of any boats afloat. A writer in the New Albany *Ledger-Standard* in 1877, reviewing the

prosperity brought to the town in earlier days by the boat building industry, estimated that at one time over two thousand men were employed by the ship yards, foundries, smiths and chandlers directly engaged in building and outfitting steamboats at that point.

A special type of boat was developed by the western builders for use in the shallow waters of the Ohio and Mississippi. The earlier boats were fashioned after ocean going models, but in later types the hold was abolished, the machinery put on deck and the bottom made flat. Such a boat could travel in three or four feet of water which was of great advantage in the western rivers where shallow water was to be found during many months of each year.

There was intense rivalry between the different lines of boats in regard both to speed and to the service given to passengers. On the best boats excellent meals were served, the staterooms were well furnished and cared for, and everything possible was done to attract travellers from opposition lines. A record especially prized was for the time up stream from New Orleans to the rapids at Louisville and New Albany, a distance of nearly fifteen hundred miles. In 1817 the Washington had required twenty-five days to make the trip. Twenty years later the trip had been made in one-fourth the time, and by 1851 a record of four days and twenty-three hours was held by the Belle Key.

Then came the Eclipse, a boat built at the New Albany yards, well designed, beautifully finished and described by old river men, who remember her with affection, as the finest boat that ever floated on the western rivers.

On her first trip, in May, 1852, she lowered the record of the Belle Key by five hours, but the following May there appeared on the river the A. L. Shotwell, also built at New Albany, with the avowed purpose of capturing and holding the record.

The Shotwell made the trip up stream amidst great excitement. At each bend in the rivers she was greeted with shouts of encouragement, bands playing as she steamed by, and everywhere her time was checked and rechecked to settle the thousands of wagers that had been made. She lowered the record by seven hours and forty minutes.

Then in the same month the Eclipse came up the river, with her Master, E. T. Sturgeon, bent on regaining the laurels for his beloved boat. Never had there been such excitement. At one point she would be ahead of the time of the Shotwell, at another a few minutes behind. Every shift of the wind, every change in the current, affected her speed. Vicksburg, Helena, Memphis, Cairo, Evansville, were passed in succession with the result still in doubt, but when she sped by New Albany, and turned for the landing at Louisville, a record of four days, nine hours, and thirty minutes had been established.

And, says a writer of that day, when we take into consideration the low water, swift current, and other obstacles she met with, we may safely set her down as the fastest boat in the world.

For years afterwards, a traveller would see signs posted at many places along the way giving the time of the Shotwell and the Eclipse to that point. Perhaps some of these signs are still standing, silent witnesses of the intense rivalry in the days when the steamboat was queen of the western rivers.

An old steamboat man, writing of racing on the river at that time says :

It was the habit of boats going up stream when they needed fuel to take in tow a barge loaded with wood or coal. If another boat was coming up behind that was thought to be willing to race, all the crew, including the cabin boys, would turn in and help unload the barge so that it could be set adrift at the earliest moment. The crew would also pile the fuel near the firemen to help keep the fires roaring hot.

In emergencies when fuel was short it was not unusual for freight to be used for such purpose. When a boat had bacon as freight it was regarded as excellent fuel and in a race was used without hesitancy.

With the development of the railways the steamboat trade began to decline, yet for years a large amount of business continued to be carried on the river. As late as 1873 the records of the wharfmaster at Evansville showed over twenty-five hundred steamboat arrivals at that port during the year, while sixty or more were registered as being owned or controlled there.

An interesting feature on the river front at Evansville was the large dry dock, kept constantly busy repairing boats that came from as far as Pittsburgh and New Orleans. It was

managed by E. C. Murray, who had designed and constructed the Confederate ram, Merrimac.

Now that a network of railways is spread over the central west, the steamboat traffic has dwindled away, perhaps never to return. Towboats, with strings of coal barges go up and down the river, and little steamers ply on uncertain schedules between settlements that are not reached by rail. But the glory of the old times is gone.

The present trend of transportation away from the river is shown by the census of 1920, which reports that Indianapolis, an inland town, has grown more rapidly in the preceding ten years than Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville or any other large town on the river.

Many attempts have been made to revive the steamboat business. Transportation by water is cheaper than by rail and when the series of dams and locks now being constructed by the Government, is completed, a uniform depth of nine feet of water will be maintained throughout the year, an ideal condition hardly dreamed of in those busy years when boats were delayed for weeks by low water.

But a great advantage of the railways, with which the boats cannot compete, is their ability to run a switch to every warehouse and factory and load and unload at their door; while freight taken by boat must be reloaded several times, an operation that causes delay and expense.

Whatever the future commercial use of the Ohio river may be, its great value as an artery of transportation, in the days when the prosperous central west was being transformed from the wilderness, can never be overlooked.

The charm of the river will always remain. Flowing with a gentle current, between high wooded banks, it has ever been regarded as one of the most beautiful of streams. The earliest French explorers called it the beautiful river, and its appeal is as great today as when, two and a half centuries ago, they first beheld it.

The views from the hills at Madison, or at Hanover, New Albany, Rockport and other such points on the Indiana shore are of unsurpassed beauty, and many a traveller who has seen the great valley from these heights has wondered that such scenes are so little known. Once known they are never to be forgotten.