Reviews and Notices


The history of transportation on the Mississippi has long been a fascinating theme for writers and readers alike. What student of Western history has not reveled in Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*, George B. Merrick’s *Old Times on the Upper Mississippi* and Herbert Quick’s *Mississippi Steamboatin’*?

The volume under review deals especially with navigation on the upper Mississippi and is an attempt to present a connected story of what the author rightly calls “one of the most picturesque chapters of American economic history.” The prospect of a renascence of this navigation is offered as a reason for the publication of such a work at the present time.

Beginning with an account of the discovery and exploration of the River, the writer passes quickly to flatboat days; then to the appearance of the steamboat; to the “Golden Age” of the forties; to the fifties, when “the steamboat ruled the river and the river ruled the Valley;” to the critical years of the sixties; to the decadence of the river traffic; and finally to recent efforts at revival.

As the drama, which it really is, unfolds, we witness the characters famous in river lore cross the stage: Marquette and Joliet; LaSalle; the French voyageurs; Mike Fink, King of Mississippi Keelboatmen; Henry M. Shreve, the steamboat builder; Mark Twain, the pilot; and numerous other figures connected with traffic on the Father of Waters. “Steamboating,” declares the author, “was not merely a business to a river man: it was his life. . . . To be on the river was the goal of his ambition from the time when, as a small and eager boy, he began to haunt the river front. The river was a part of him; it was almost as though river water ran in his veins instead of mere blood. The river man was there because his heart was there . . . there alone he felt at home.”

There are also interesting chapters on early river towns, the men and their boats and steamboating as a business.
The "seeds of decay" in the river traffic, the author affirms, were present before the Civil War. In earlier times practically all the surplus produce of the Northwest had gone down stream to New Orleans. But a shift was noticeable from west to east in the fifties. The canals and the Great Lakes provided a competitive route. More disastrous still for the down river trade were the East-West trunk-line railroads which were constructed in the decade before the War. The result was a relative falling off of river transportation. The Civil War hastened the process. While there was some recovery after the close of the conflict, the interior rivers never regained their old dominance. The rafting business furnishes the only exception. This reached its height on the upper Mississippi about 1890.

"Can the River Come Back?" is the title of one of the later chapters. The author believes there is a possibility of this taking place. European markets will not be so important in the future. The most promising areas of America's foreign trade lie in South America and the Orient. Therefore, cheap water transportation via the Mississippi to the Gulf will again take on prominence.

The Inland Waterways Corporation, a government owned corporation, inaugurated a modern barge service on the lower Mississippi below St. Louis in 1924 and on the Upper Mississippi in 1927. The improvements on the Ohio River were completed in 1929, providing for a nine foot stage of water from Pittsburgh to the mouth of the river. The year 1933 saw the opening of the Lakes-to-the-Gulf waterway from Chicago via the Drainage Canal and the Illinois River. Then the Federal Barge Lines were extended to this route. At the present time the Federal government is engaged in constructing a series of dams on the upper Mississippi which will be completed by 1936. This project will provide a nine foot channel for this section of the river which will create a condition similar to that provided for the Ohio. "Ol' Man River" may again be heard from and that in the near future.

The student, as well as the general reader, whether or not he agrees with the author's conclusions, will find this admirable volume of great interest. A very complete bibliography for each chapter is given in the back part of the book.

CHARLES ROLL.