

Notes on Wabash River Steamboating: Early Lafayette

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The first Steamboat that ever entered the Wabash came to Lafayette in 1826. The citizens were seized with wonder, and not sooner was the plank thrown ashore than she was boarded by all who could crowd on her. When she was made fast the engineer let off steam, the noise of which led all to think she had bursted, when every last man jumped overboard and made for shore as fast as his half drowning state would permit them.¹

Immediately following the War of 1812 an internal improvement party sprang up all over the United States. The need for an improved system of transportation was great, for farmers had no adequate method of transporting their surplus products to markets. Every state was busy with a "System." Logan Esarey wrote that from 1817 to 1827 "the 'System' was the commonest subject of discussion. No one knew exactly what was meant by the 'System,' but it was felt that as soon as possible the State by some means or other, would construct some kind of a system of transportation that would answer the needs of the people."²

New York was among the first of the states to feel this need of a system of transportation and in 1817 started a canal to Lake Erie. Later, this line was extended in Indiana from Fort Wayne to Lafayette to Evansville, by the Wabash and Erie Canal.

Although the people of the state of Indiana were united in the proposal to improve the state's internal system of roads and rivers, a division of energies existed. Two factions arose: One favored New York City as the best market for its goods; the other looked to New Orleans as the leading city to receive the state's produce. Even after the Wabash and Erie Canal was built, one route for shipping produce was down the Wabash River to the larger rivers and on to New Orleans. From there to New York, transportation was comparatively

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¹ G. W. Hawes, *Lafayette City Directory, 1858-1859* (Lafayette, 1858), 115.

² Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana* (3d ed.; 2 vols., Fort Wayne, 1924), I, 401.

easy. E. J. Benton writes of this route: "In 1836 the cheapest freight route from New York into southern Indiana was by New Orleans and the rivers. The canal boards adjusted their tolls so as to meet the river rates."³

The settlers in the region of the Wabash River had high hopes for making the river a very useful thoroughfare for shipping. They found it hazardous, however, because of snags, sunken logs, sand bars, and rocky rapids. The first survey undertaken to ascertain these obstructions and consider their removal was carried out on state appropriations by William Polke and Thomas S. Hinde, river commissioners, in 1823, at the request of the governors of Indiana and Illinois. The river was examined for fifteen miles above and below the Grand Rapids, which were just below Vincennes. In a beautifully handwritten document the commissioners urged the improvement of the navigation of the river from the "mouth to the source." With "inconsiderable expenditure," they believed, the river could be made navigable to the portage point, Huntington. A canal built from Fort Wayne to Huntington, then, would open a waterway directly from Lake Erie, and the "Western country" generally would be benefited. In conclusion the commissioners wrote: "It most evidently appears to be the natural route for connecting the waters of Lake Erie and of the Ohio river."⁴

The estimate of the "inconsiderable expenditure" was between \$25,000 and \$35,400, and was considered beyond the means of the two states at this time. No appropriation, therefore, was made.⁵

The cry from New York and Indiana for an extension of the Erie Canal was so great in the early 1820's that in March, 1827, the federal government donated "a strip of land one-half of five sections wide"⁶ to Indiana, provided it would start the actual digging for the canal by 1832. Early in that year the digging of the Wabash and Erie Canal was begun. The

³ E. J. Benton, "The Wabash Trade Route in the Development of the Old Northwest," *Johns Hopkins University Studies in History and Political Science* (Baltimore, 1883-), XXI (1903), 105.

⁴ William Polke and Thomas S. Hinde, *Survey Report to Governors of Indiana and Illinois, 1823*, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis. In this survey the commissioners also report on surveying sites for two canals, one on either side of the river, one each for Illinois and Indiana.

⁵ *Lafayette Free Press & Commercial Advertiser*, April 8, 1836.

⁶ A section of land contains 640 acres (one square mile); the federal government gave Indiana 1600 acres.

first section, from Fort Wayne to Huntington, thirty-two miles, was opened with celebration on July 4, 1835.⁷

The settlers of Tippecanoe County in their internal improvement plans talked at length during those early years of proposing Lafayette for a port of entry; therefore, a "memorial and joint resolution of the Legislature of the state of Indiana, relative to the propriety of declaring Lafayette on the Wabash river, a port of entry" was sent to the state legislature late in 1834. The bill requested that Lafayette be made a port of entry because it was advantageously situated in one of the most fertile parts of the western country; the river could be made navigable, so the report read, for the entire year; and by making this city a port, the state would be complying with the Northwest Ordinance, which declared that "the navigable waters leading into the Mississippi and St. Lawrence . . . shall be common highways and forever free."⁸ The bill, which included a request for federal appropriations to improve the navigation of the river, was approved by the legislature on December 31, 1834; Senator John Tipton soon presented it to Congress. Both houses approved it, but President Jackson vetoed the measure.

In the second survey of the Wabash, presented to Congress in 1834, is an excellent description of the river: "The Committee on Roads and Canals, to whom was referred 'A bill to improve the navigation of the Wabash river,' beg leave to report: . . . The Wabash river, thirty miles westwardly of Fort Wayne, becomes a considerable stream, and previously uniting with the Salamania, the Mississiniway, and numerous other small streams, it forms a junction with Eel river at Logansport, and there exhibits the appearance of a large and noble river. From this point, however, to the mouth of Tippecanoe, it is rough and rapid, and the navigation obstructed by rocks and bars. The mouth of the Tippecanoe river is considered the head of steamboat navigation, as it is also the western termination of the Wabash and Erie canal, though steamboats have frequently ascended a few miles higher up, and in one instance, as high up as Logansport, at the mouth of Eel. From the mouth of Tippecanoe to its juncture with

⁷ Esarey, *History of Indiana*, I, 408.

⁸ *Laws of a Local Nature, Passed and Published at the Nineteenth Session of the General Assembly of the State of Indiana, [1834-1835], Chapter XXVII, 280.*

the Ohio river, is a distance of more than 500 miles by the river. Above Vincennes the navigation is not materially obstructed, except in times of very low water, when there are many sand bars, lodgments of drift wood, snags, and sunken logs to be encountered; and for about four months in each year, except for very small boats and craft, it cannot, in its present condition, be said to be navigable at all. The chief obstructions however, and the dangerous obstructions, are to be found below Vincennes, where the river has great size and much power, and rushes with tremendous force and velocity through rapids obstructed by rocks, and islands, and crooked channels. A region of river here, chiefly above the mouth of White river, of 15 or 20 miles in extent, is that which presents the greatest obstacle to its navigation. These obstructions consist of ripples, eight or nine in number, and create in various places of the river, difficult and dangerous navigation, in all not exceeding three miles. . . . The Grand rapids, which are the most difficult and extensive of these, and where the river has its greatest width, has two and a half feet depth at low water; and at this place the obstructions are in length about three quarters of a mile. . . .

“No river of the west, in proportion to its size, is connected with a country so generally and so extensively fertile. . . . Its lands are proverbial for their fertility. The villages on its banks have already become large and prosperous, and the quantity of produce borne upon it to the Orleans market, considering the newness of the country, exceeds that of any other of the secondary rivers of the west. It is indeed the largest tributary of the Ohio, and certainly in many respects, the most important one. . . .”

Concerning the river's export trade the report states: “In the year 1828, between twelve and fifteen hundred flat boats descended the Wabash and White rivers from the country above Mount Carmel, all bound for a southern market; and the annual increase of this trade has been estimated at thirty-three and a third per cent, from the year 1820 to the present time. This ratio of increase, however, has occasionally been checked by occurrences of dry seasons, in which these obstructions prevented the boats and the produce of the country from getting out of the river. Such was the last year, in which the losses sustained by the people of the Upper Wabash, on account of the condition of the river, are estimated at \$400,000.

The import trade of this river is proportionably great; but the present condition of the trade and of the country, exhibits a faint and languid picture of what may be expected in a few years hence, when its navigation shall be improved, and a canal opened to communicate with Lake Erie."⁹

The Indiana General Assembly, in January, 1835, passed a bill appropriating \$12,000 to be used in clearing the Wabash River of the "most dangerous and prominent" obstructions to steamboat navigation. During the summer and fall, however, the water was too high for operations and not much could be accomplished.¹⁰

The Wabash and Erie Canal was finally finished in 1843; Lafayette, regarded as the great steamboat landing and commercial center of the region, was its southern terminus.¹¹ Soon regular packet lines on the canal were in competition with packets on the river; a through line of traffic by canal and river from New York City to New Orleans had been established.

The village of Lafayette was laid out in 1825 by William Digby, about the time the first steamboat chugged up the Wabash River to the new hamlet. Sandford C. Cox, an early settler in that part of the state, has left an intimate picture of Lafayette and the river in its vicinity about 1828: "If I was called upon by a lithographer for an original sketch of the town of Lafayette and its suburbs, as it was when I first saw it, I would in the first place draw the Wabash river, on a proper scale, . . . give its exact curve and meanderings, with a ferry flat, skiff, canoe, two perogues, and a keel boat, moored along its eastern bank, near the foot of Main street. I next would sketch three or four rude cabins, scattered along on the bank of the river, from Main street to the foot of Ferry street Near the bank of the river, . . . I would draw a few large sugar trees, growing on a beautiful blue grass plat. . . . On the blue grass . . . between the sugar trees and the ferry, I would draw a group of men—some pitching quoits, some hopping three hops, others wrestling, while others would be trying to get up a foot race. . . . The streets were then opened in patches, between houses only, and the roads and

⁹ "Report of the Committee on Roads and Canals," in *Senate Documents*, 23 Cong., 2 Sess., II, No. 18 (serial number 267), 2-4.

¹⁰ *Lafayette Free Press & Commercial Advertiser*, May 29, 1835, April 8, 1836.

¹¹ Esarey, *History of Indiana*, I, 408.

paths were cut through the brushwood and timber that covered the most of the town plat."

Cox wrote of the river: "Its green banks were lined with the richest verdure. Wild flowers intermingled with the tall grass that nodded in the passing breeze. Blossoms of the wild plum, hawthorn and red-bud made the air redolent. The notes of the black-bird and blue-jay mingled with the shrill cry of the king-fisher, river-gull and speckled loon. . . . Schools of fishes—salmon, bass, red-horse, and pike—swam close along the shore, catching at the blossoms of the red-bud and plum that floated on the surface of the water."¹²

There is evidence that steamboats were running on some parts of the Wabash River as early as, or earlier than, 1823. A traveler in the region wrote in a letter of 1818: "It is expected that a steam boat will be in complete operation on the Wabash, next spring or summer."¹³ In the river survey of 1823, "boats drawing 20 inches of water" are mentioned as having negotiated a ripple nine miles below Vincennes. The boats that made their way up the Wabash were small: vessels of forty, eighty, or one hundred tons were common. Infrequently there were some weighing as much as 250 tons. Even these were toy boats as compared to the 1,467 tons of the well-known "Robert E. Lee," or the 1,837 tonnage of the "Delta Queen," the steamboat that runs the Ohio-Mississippi tourist trade today. Tippecanoe County is listed in the *Indiana Gazeteer* for 1850 as having eight boatbuilders. Lytle's *Merchant Steam Vessels of the United States, 1807-1868* lists three boats as having been Lafayette-built: "Sam Gronendyke," "Governor Morton," and "May Flower."¹⁴

In spite of the many surveys and much talk of the Wabash River, not everyone was aware of its existence. L.H.S., an unknown gentleman, probably of Terre Haute, told the following story: "It will no doubt seem strange to the people of the present day—but it was nevertheless perfectly true that some of the Captains of the little boats then plying in the Cincinnati and Pittsburg trade, were ignorant of even the

¹² Sandford C. Cox, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* (Lafayette, 1860), 23-25, 27, 75-76.

¹³ Harlow Lindley, *Indiana as Seen by Early Travellers* (Indianapolis, 1916), 112 n.

¹⁴ *Indiana Gazeteer* (Indianapolis, 1850), 400; William M. Lytle, *Merchant Steam Vessels of the United States, 1807-1868* (Mystic, Connecticut, 1952), 283, 78, 125.

name and locality of the Wabash River. The following well-remembered incident will afford an illustration. A small boat landed at the wharf, and I went on board and enquired for the Captain. He presented himself, and I said, 'Captain, I want to charter a boat.' 'For what trade,' he said. 'For the Wabash River.' 'The Wabash River!—where the d—l is that?' 'Why, don't you know? The river that empties itself into the Ohio above Shawneetown.' 'Umph! catch me risking my boat up that — creek.' And this was not a solitary case—for such or similar scenes occurred with a half a dozen others."¹⁵

Among the steamboat men who did find the Wabash, however, was Thomas Hill Rogers, grandfather of Bruce Rogers. He was one of the first steamboat captains to ascend the river, probably in the late 1830's. "He was so pleased with the prospects of the then infant city of Lafayette that he moved his family and possessions [t]here in 1840, a year after John Purdue arrived."¹⁶

Looking at the Wabash River today at Lafayette, as it takes its muddy way beneath the city's Brown and Main Street bridges, one may well wonder if there could ever have been a wharf at the foot of those precipitous banks. Today there are no signs whatever of pavement or other construction. An ordinance providing for the making and grading of a wharf on the Wabash River between Ferry and Columbia streets was passed August 4, 1835.¹⁷ In April, 1846, wharfage in the amount of \$94.00 was collected.¹⁸ Part of this amount was undoubtedly canal tolls.

The Lafayette *Daily Courier* of October 17, 1850, stated: "The City Engineer was instructed to survey the Wharf from Main to Ferry Streets, as to the best means of improving and repairing the same." In the *Courier* of January 31, 1851, was a paragraph titled, "Wharf Improvement." "Our City Fathers are pushing ahead this work with commendable energy . . . The plan adopted will help, materially, the access to the steamboat landing—give more room for the unloading of goods—the grade will be easier, and in appearance will be decidedly for the better . . . The cost of the present improvement will be about \$1200."

¹⁵ Lafayette *Daily Courier*, March 26, 1853.

¹⁶ William M. Hepburn, unpublished paper on Bruce Rogers.

¹⁷ Lafayette *Free Press*, August 28, 1835.

¹⁸ *Tippecanoe Journal & Lafayette Free Press*, April 30, 1846.

In Lafayette's City Hall is filed the original "Ordinance for Regulating the City Wharf passed May 25, 1853." Lafayette became incorporated in that year; thus this document is signed by its first mayor, James O'Brian. The handwritten ordinance states in part: "Sec. 1, Be it ordained by the Mayor and Common Council of the City of Lafayette that the city Marshall shall have charge of and superintend the city wharf and collect all charges against all boats or vessels as herein provided and keep a correct account with day and date of the number of boats of every description, that may land at said wharf . . . and pay over to the treasurer of the said city, the amount of charges collected by him during the preceding week, as wharfage Sec. 2, That the rates of charges for landing and discharging at said wharf . . . shall be as follows, Viz[:] For every steam boat, of less burden than 100 tons, the sum of three dollars, and over one hundred tons, the sum of four dollars. For every other boat, water craft, floats, or other vessel of burden, . . . the sum of one dollar. The above charges will entitle the said boats, or other vessels to lay at said wharf for forty-eight hours only, and for any longer time, steam boats shall pay One dollar per day. Keels, flats, or other vessels, fifty cents per day, excepting Sundays, and in cases, where boats or other vessels are ice bound. All boats, vessels, floats, or rafts, landing at said wharf, at the same time or lying at said wharf, or any goods or property of any kind lying on the wharf, shall be subject to removal, or ordered away by the Marshall, after having laid a sufficient time to discharge, or to be removed. This power shall only be exercised under the necessity of giving place to others." Section three concerned itself with the master or the owner or agent of any water craft who refused to pay the city marshall the wharfage due, or who failed to carry out any other provision of this ordinance; a delinquent would be convicted before the mayor and fined a sum not exceeding fifty dollars.¹⁹

The Lafayette *Daily Courier* for June 21, 1853, carries a message from Mayor O'Brian, in which he states that the "city wharf is not sufficiently large to accommodate the increasing commerce of our city Within the past year the wharf has paid into the city treasury about \$300.00, which

¹⁹ Ordinance Record, City of Lafayette, May 14, 1853—October 18, 1872, pp. 19-20. This document is filed in the Lafayette City Hall.

is about 20% upon the cost of its construction. . . . The city is in possession of nearly all the ground lying between the canal and the river . . . it is hoped that during the current year something will be done to extend the wharf, either up or down the river."

This description of a steamboat's arrival at Lafayette is found in the *Lafayette Daily Courier* of March 20, 1850: "Ding-Dong-Ding Cheerfully sounded, this morning, the bell of the Packet awaking the pleasant reflection that spring is really upon us, and that we are fairly emancipated from the icy bonds of winter. There is excitement in the movements of water craft, no matter how frequent it occurs, that never tires. Upon the arrival and departure of every steamer will the wharf be seen crowded with eager gazers, as intensely interested as though it was the first time the scene had been witnessed. And even as the packet bell is heard in the distance, giving notice of its coming, many are attracted thereby and wend their way to witness its arrival."

This vessel arriving at Lafayette is recorded as having just "discharged freight at the ports of New Albany, Evansville, Henderson, Uniontown, Mt. Vernon, Graysville, Mt. Carmel, Vincennes, Hudsonville, Darwin, Terre Haute, Tecumseh, Clinton, Montezuma, Perrysville, Covington, and Attica."²⁰ This unknown vessel might well have been the "Tribune," one of the well-known Wabash packets. "We just dropped in upon [the] beautiful steamer this morning, and were truly surprised to see the magnificence of style in which she has been gotten up. We have neither time nor space today to give a description of her proportions or appointments, but we will say that she is far ahead, in every particular, of any boat that has ever visited our city. The 'Tribune' leaves for Evansville this morning at ten o'clock, and as she is of very light draught, there are no fears apprehended of a delay in consequence of the low stage of the river."²¹ The "Tribune," a sidewheeler of 251 tons, drew twenty inches of water. Built in New Albany, Indiana, in 1849, expressly for the Wabash trade, she carried (as did most western river boats) passengers and freight. The "Tribune" was scheduled to leave Lafayette every Thursday at 10:00 A.M. It is recorded that she made

²⁰ *Lafayette Daily Courier*, January 18, 1850.

²¹ *Ibid.*, December 6, 1849.

at least three trips to Lafayette in the year before she burned in a Louisiana bayou, in 1850.²²

Another vessel that docked at the Lafayette wharf was the "J. W. Stockwell." The editor of the *Lafayette Daily Courier* wrote that this steamboat "has paid annual visits to this city every spring, for the last five years—indeed, ever since she was launched, and came plowing the wave to her old 'headquarters' last night. As usual, she was freighted to the guards with groceries for that 'mammoth establishment' of Fowler, Earl and Bruce. It is a singular fact and worthy of note, that the *J. W. Stockwell* never fails to find a freshet in the Wabash when she comes, so universally has this been the case that our merchants begin to watch the movements of this steamer more than they do the clouds, etc."²³

The editors' columns in the Lafayette newspapers of the time included market and weather reports, river and canal boat timetables, and eulogies of the town; they give a picture of a struggling pioneer river community. "Business is rather lively than otherwise in Lafayette. The sound of the hammer is continually falling upon the ear, and the eye is delighted with the passing and repassing of wagons and canal boats laden with the surplus products of our rich soil."²⁴ The April 6, 1843, issue of the *Lafayette Daily Courier* records: "The river has risen about 3 feet and a half and is still rising slowly. Four steam boats are lying at our Wharf, discharging and taking in freight. There is a general buzz of business. . . . Wheat is worth 37 and a half cents per bushel and flour from \$2.25 to \$2.37 per bbl."²⁵

The steamboat register was an established part of the early Lafayette newspapers during the high-water months of February, March, April, May, October, November, and December. After 1843, when the canal register was added to that of the steamboat record, the combined boat listings during high-water months were impressive. The following is an example from a newspaper in 1844:

Arrivals

April 24 Pinta, Pittsburgh
29 Monticello, Cincinnati, and Nathan Hale, New Orleans

²² *Ibid.*; Lytle, *Merchant Steam Vessels of the United States*, 189.

²³ *Lafayette Daily Courier*, March 27, 1856.

²⁴ *Tippecanoe Journal & Lafayette Free Press*, November 3, 1842.

²⁵ *Lafayette Daily Courier*, April 6, 1843.

30 H.S. Thibedaux, New Orleans, and Cicero, Pittsburgh
 May 1 Alpine, Evansville

Departures

April 25 Pinta, Evansville
 29 Monticello, Logansport
 30 Nathan Hale, New Orleans
 May 1 H.S. Thibedaux, New Orleans
 1 Monticello, Cincinnati²⁶

Lafayette newspapers recorded little about freight or passenger rates on the Wabash steamers. One Lafayette paper, however, printed an article on passenger rates copied from the *Wheeling Gazette*. "The *Gazette* very properly remarks however, that some Steam Boats charge less, the prices depending, in some degree, upon the number of boats in port, and the abundance of or scarcity of passengers. We extract from the table the distance from Pittsburgh of some of the principal points, with the price of cabin passage charged:

Pittsburg to Wheeling	96 mi.	\$ 3[.]00
Portsmouth	350 "	10[.]00
Cincinnati	451 "	13[.]00
Louisville	583 "	15[.]00
Natchez	1704 "	30[.]00
New Orleans	2004 "	35[.]00

The above prices include boarding. The prices of deck passage are about one fourth of these, the passengers finding themselves. Thus to Louisville the deck passage is \$3, cabin \$12 [*sic*]; to New Orleans, deck 8, cabin 35. The deck is covered, and contains berths, but it is a very undesirable way of traveling. The passage to Louisville is generally performed in 2½ days and to New Orleans, is from eight to ten; returning nearly double this time. The ordinary speed of the boats is 12 miles an hour down the river, and 6 up. Pittsburgh Adv."²⁷

Louis Hunter, in *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, states that freight rates fluctuated greatly according to high or low water. Low water meant cargoes were lessened, charges heightened; high water, charges lowered. "During the 1840's freight rates from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati ranged from as little as 8 cents per hundred pounds to as much as \$1.50; from Pittsburgh to Louisville, from 10 cents to \$1.62; and from

²⁶ *Tippecanoe Journal & Lafayette Free Press*, May 2, 1844.

²⁷ *Lafayette Free Press*, May 29, 1835.

Pittsburgh to St. Louis, from 20 cents to \$2.00.”²⁸ The important rates for both steamboat men and shippers were those which prevailed during the active seasons of navigation and shipping; these seasons were spring and late autumn on a large part of the river system. At these times steamboats offered much the cheapest form of transportation available in the West during the several decades immediately preceding the Civil War. Newspaper items of 1851 indicate that in Lafayette, at least, the shippers set the rates: “The boats that come up here complain of the very low freights offered by our shippers—they say they can generally do better below.” “But few boats come here for the reason that they can get better, or equally as good, prices below. Our shippers must be a little more liberal.”²⁹

In a letter from Thomas T. Benbridge to John Tipton is a record of freight on the Wabash, shipped on the steamboat “Sylph.” What distance the freight was shipped is not told. The letter is as follows:

Hon John Tipton

Lafayette 6 April 1834

Dear Sir The Steam Boat Sylph arrived here on 26 Ulto with your furniture on board which she brought up from the rapids with orders to leave it with some person that would advance the fregit & charges beleiving that you would sooner hav them this near home advanced the freight fifty eight dollars ninety two cent & requested Mr C Virgus to inform your agent at Logansport that they were here & to send for them the safest way from this place will be in waggons as on board of a Keel or Pirogue they will be more likely to get rubbed & damaged it is all in good order except the Centre table one of the legs is unglued which I shall have glued on before it leavs this [place].

Yours respectfully

Thos. T. Benbridge³⁰

It is highly probable that the majority of boats which came to Lafayette carried both passengers and freight. One Wabash River boat, however, the “Richard Henry Lee,” was “exclusively for freight having only a Texas deck for the accommodation of officers.” As the “Lee” departed for Evans-

²⁸ Louis Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1949), 375.

²⁹ *Lafayette Daily Courier*, February 28, March 3, 1851.

³⁰ Nellie Armstrong Roberts and Dorothy Riker, *The John Tipton Papers* (Indianapolis, 1942), III, 47.

ville from Lafayette, with 4,000 sacks of corn, the *Courier* editor wrote: "She is the best money-making boat that has yet come here."³¹

Another departure from the usual combination freight and passenger vessels on the Wabash was the "Floating Palace." Compared to present-day advertising posters, the wood cut of this boat in the April, 1853, issues of the *Courier* is somber indeed. At the top of the picture are the words: "Spalding & Rogers' Circus Company." The prices of seats for the circus performance were advertised: "Dress Circle, all arm chairs"—fifty cents; "Family Boxes, Cushioned seats"—twenty-five cents; "Colored Gallery" seats—fifty cents; and "Gallery" seats—twenty-five cents. The "Floating Palace" was scheduled for stops on April 27, 28, and 29, at Independence, Attica, and Covington, and so forth on down the river.³² She seems to have been a variant of the showboats which came to the rivers after the turn of the nineteenth century.

There were many accidents on the rivers involving steamboats. Louis Hunter classifies steamboat accidents into five main kinds: "explosions and other accidents caused by the escape of steam; snaggings; collisions; fires; and a miscellaneous class which came to be listed in government reports as 'wrecked and foundered' and included accidents due to storms, to grounding, and to striking rocks and other obstructions."³³ Most of these kinds of accidents occurred at one time or another on the Wabash River, according to contemporary newspaper accounts, examples of which follow:

On Friday, June 5, 1835, the "Osage," a small sidewheeler of eighty-nine tons, loaded with salt, nosed up to the Lafayette wharf. As she attempted to dock, she struck the corner of the wharf and "broke a hole in the hull." "We understand it was not discovered at the time that any damage was done the boat. She dropped down a short distance, for the purpose of a more commodious landing, but before a landing was effected, it was discovered that the boat was sinking. She was immediately brought to, and for a long time thought that exertion would be in vain; that she must sink; but through bailing her and discharging freight, she was kept afloat till

³¹ *Lafayette Daily Courier*, February 25, 27, 1851.

³² *Ibid.*, April 20, 1853.

³³ Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 271.

she was secured fast to the shore, and by means of cables swung to the trees growing on the bank. After securing her in this manner, the freight was discharged, and the leak stopped . . . there was a considerable loss sustained in freight . . . we have heard to the amount of fifteen hundred or two thousand dollars." The next morning, however, the "Osage" left for the rapids.³⁴

"The *Fairy Queen*, a 60 ton sidewheeler, on her passage up stream on Sunday last, struck a snag, about four miles below this place, and sunk immediately, in seven feet of water. By the unremitting and laborious efforts of the crew and passengers, however, she was raised, and arrived here on Monday . . . The damage to the cargo (salt) will probably not exceed one thousand dollars. The *Fairy Queen* has gone up stream, having repaired here sufficient to justify the experiment."³⁵

"A card to the public: We the subscribers, passengers on the steam boat *Monticello* (121 tons) sidewheeler, on her trip from Cincinnati to Lafayette, would state in justice of the commanding officers of said steamer, that during the trip, and especially that part of it, wherein they attempted and finally succeeded, in crossing the grand rapids, that every exertion was made to save from damage the goods, that were unavoidably sunk in one of the Lighters, by being blown into the top of a fallen tree that projected from the bank, while crossing the Rapids. And we feel particularly grateful to Capt. Edmund Gray, and his officers, for their kind attention and gentlemanly conduct during the trip." This testimonial was signed by eighteen passengers.³⁶

"The steamboat *W. H. Day* (57 ton stern wheeler) took on board a full cargo of Flour at our Wharf the latter part of last week, destined for New Orleans; but, owing to carelessness, want of knowledge, of the channel, or something else, she ran aground upon the sand-bar just below the paper mill—where she still remains. She has, we believe, discharged her freight and abandoned the trip. The flour is owned by Messers Hull & Spencer, proprietors of the Lafayette Mills."³⁷

The steamboat "American" (118 tons) "ran aground

³⁴ *Lafayette Free Press*, June 12, 1835.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, March 4, 1836.

³⁶ *Tippecanoe Journal & Lafayette Free Press*, May 2, 1844.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, December 24, 1846.

near the foot of South Street attempting to leave the wharf. Her cargo was 1600 bbls. flour for Evansville." (More than a year later another newspaper item concerning the "American" appeared. "This boat which has lain at the lower landing for a year past, has had the machinery taken out, decks razed and the hull is now being fitted up for a barge. The machinery and boilers are reserved by Mr. E. H. Halliday for a distillery. The house will be converted into a kitchen or out-building or perhaps a residence for some humble citizen of the town. The hull has been purchased by Judge Crane, an occasional speculator in produce, to carry a load of sack oats to New Orleans, for which destination she will start with current speed in a few days. If any one is desirous to float down the Wabash, Ohio, and Mississippi we presume they can get a birth [*sic*] For further particulars inquire on board.")³⁸

The steamer "J. B. Porter," a 62-ton sidewheeler, "was sunk by striking a snag in the Wabash river a few days ago. She will, it is supposed, be a total loss." (The following year, however, this boat was advertised to run regularly during the season as a Wabash packet. The final record is that she was abandoned in 1852.)³⁹

"A few days since the steamer *Cabinet* came in collision with the Covington Draw Bridge while in the act of passing. The boat was injured very materially and the estimated loss is \$2,000. The boat, contrary to the usual manner, attempted to pass through the draw bow foremost. The circumstances attending the accident will keep the boat from recovering damages. The bridge was not damaged."⁴⁰

A "passenger named Burdlow, fell from the deck of the Wabash Packet, Kate Sarchet, near Granville, yesterday and was drowned. Every effort possible was made by the officers of the boat to rescue him, but without avail. He was on his way to Vincennes. He has relatives in this vicinity."⁴¹

Steamboat races, a popular sport on the large rivers with crew, passengers, and observers, often took place on the Wabash as well. A race between the "Return" and the "Aurilla

³⁸ *Lafayette Daily Courier*, December 4, 1849, March 4, 1851.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, March 28, 1850, February 20, 1851; Lytle, *Merchant Steam Vessels of the United States*, 95.

⁴⁰ *Lafayette Daily Courier*, May 19, 1853.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, January 27, 1859.

Wood" was described in a newspaper. "[The *Return*] left this morning in company with the *Aurilla Wood*, it having been agreed between the officers of the two boats, we understand, to try the running qualities of their respective crafts between this city and Terre Haute. In turning around the *Wood* got the start of her competitor about half a mile, and it was generally conceded by those on the wharf that she would increase the distance to three or four miles before reaching Attica. Who says Lafayette is not a great place, and the Wabash a great river, when we have steamboat races two or three times a week."⁴²

Today the Wabash River leads a quiet life. A glance at two maps of Indiana published ten years apart shows at once why the river became quiet and the canal slowly passed away. A map of the state in 1846-47 shows but one railroad running through the sparsely-settled territory from Madison to Indianapolis. A map of 1856-57 shows five railroads crossing the state from east to west, and four from north to south.⁴³ The steam engine, which brought to the rivers a conveyance of great worth, brought later to the western country a vehicle of greater use and importance: the "iron horse."

⁴² *Ibid.*, March 31, 1856.

⁴³ *Memorial of the Holders of Certificates of Stock of the Wabash and Erie Canal of the State of Indiana, presented to the General Assembly of the State of Indiana, March 6, 1857* (Indianapolis, 1857).