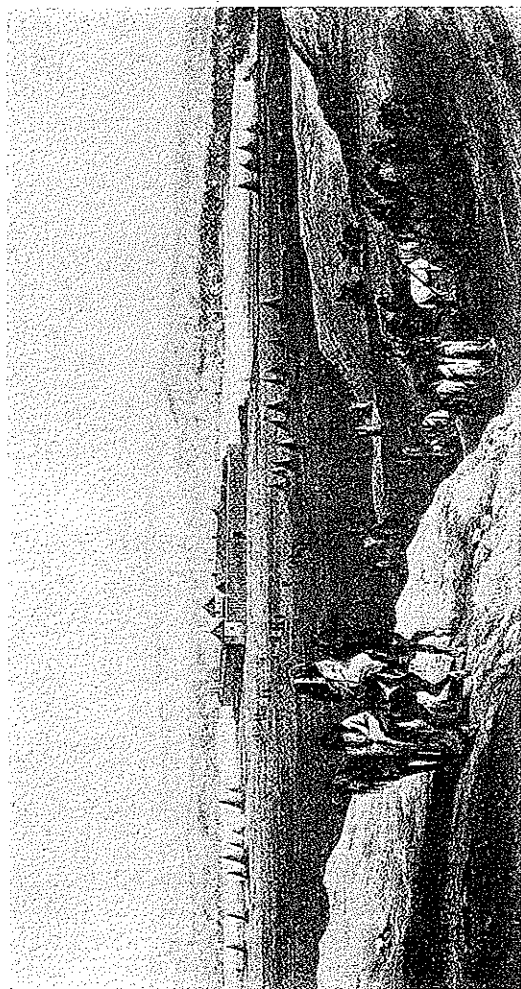


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THE
American Fur Trade
OF THE
Far West

A History of the Pioneer Trading Posts and Early
Fur Companies of the Missouri Valley and
the Rocky Mountains and of
the Overland Commerce
with Santa Fe.

MAP AND ILLUSTRATIONS

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VOLUME I.

ACADEMIC REPRINTS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

CHAPTER V.

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF THE FUR TRADE.

Means of transportation—The keelboat—The steamboat—The canoe—The mackinaw boat—The bull-boat—Steamboat voyages—The caravan—The rendezvous—The express—The cache—"Fall" and "spring" hunts.

ST. LOUIS, the principal mart and outfitting point for the fur trade, was from one to two thousand miles distant from the best hunting grounds. The matter of transportation to and from regions so remote was, it will readily be understood, one of very great importance. All that portion of the traffic, by far the larger part of the whole, which was confined to the immediate valley of the Missouri, was carried in river craft, mostly in steamboats or keelboats. In downstream navigation use was made of mackinaws, bull-boats or canoes, which were borne along by the current with but slight assistance from the oars. The interior expeditions to the valleys of the Great Salt Lake and Green river were at first conducted by pack trains, but later largely with wagons. The later Santa Fe trade was carried on principally with wagons.

THE KEELBOAT.

The early commerce of the Missouri was always romantic and interesting and not infrequently full of peril.¹ The keelboat, the historic predecessor of the steamboat, was extensively used down to 1830, and did not disappear from the river for several years thereafter. It was a boat of no

¹For a description of the Missouri river and its tributaries, and a consideration of the origin and application of the name "Missouri," see Part V., Chapter III.

mean dimensions, averaging from sixty to seventy-five feet long, fifteen to eighteen feet beam, and three to four feet depth of hold. It was built on a regular model, with a keel running from bow to stern, whence its name. Rising from the deck some four or five feet was the cargo box, cut off at each end about twelve feet shorter than the boat. This part of the boat, as the name implies, was generally used for freight, but was occasionally fitted up with staterooms when used for passengers only. The boat was built on thorough principles of ship craft, and was a strong, substantial vessel.

The means of propulsion were various, and were intended to utilize all the forces which man and nature rendered available. The cordelle was the main reliance—a long line attached to the top of a high mast, which stood a little forward of the center of the boat. It passed through a ring, which was fastened by a short line to the bow to help guide the boat, and was drawn by from twenty to forty men strung along the shore. The reason for attaching it to the mast was that it might swing clear of the brush on the bank.

It often happened at river crossings and elsewhere that the cordelle could not be used, and in such cases poles had to be resorted to. These were of various lengths suited to convenient handling, and were equipped with balls or knobs at the upper ends to rest in the hollow of the shoulder. To propel the boat by means of these poles the voyageurs were ranged in single file on each side of the deck near the bow, facing aft. Planting their poles on the river bottom, pointing down stream, they pushed steadily against them, at the same time walking towards the stern along the *passé avant*, a narrow walk some fifteen inches wide on each side of the cargo box, while the boat, yielding to their pressure, moved ahead.

It now and then happened that deep water was found in places where neither pole nor cordelle could be used. Oars were then resorted to, of which there were five or six on each side of the bow.

A very important aid, strange as it may seem, considering the character of a stream like the Missouri, was the sail. It was at times of great assistance, and even sufficient of itself to propel the boat against the current.

Thus by one means or another, and now and then by all together, the early keelboat worked and worried its way up the turbulent current of the Missouri. The best known record for a long journey, say a thousand miles, was eighteen miles per day, while the average was scarcely more than twelve or fifteen. There are several records where keelboats were extensively used for transporting troops, and one in which propeller wheels were provided to be manipulated through hand power by the soldiers. Whatever the method of propulsion, however, the task was always extremely laborious, and the large force and attendant expense required were one of the great arguments for trying the experiment, then considered a very doubtful one on the Missouri, of introducing the steamboat.

THE CANOE.

The wooden canoe, dug out from the trunk of the cottonwood, and hence often called a "dugout," was a very useful craft. Many a journey was made in these crude boats, from the heart of the wilderness two thousand miles away to St. Louis. They were extensively used for local traffic in the neighborhood of the posts.

THE MACKINAW.

The mackinaw was a flat-bottomed boat pointed at both ends, sometimes forty to fifty feet long with twelve feet beam, and three to four feet depth of hold. The oarsmen, four in number, were bestowed in the bow, and the steersman on a high perch in the stern, while the cargo was piled up in the space between them. The current was the main reliance for propulsion. The cargo was about fifteen tons, the rate of progress seventy-five to one hundred miles per day, and the cost about two dollars per day, or about one

and a half mills per mile-ton. The boats were cheaply made, and were intended only for downstream navigation, being abandoned at St. Louis. They were the cheapest of all methods for carrying freight down the river.

THE BULL-BOAT.

The bull-boat was made of buffalo skins sewn together and stretched over a frame of willow and cottonwood poles. The size was commonly about twelve by thirty feet and twenty inches deep. It had the least draught of any river craft, and was therefore best adapted to such shallow streams as the Platte. The cargo generally consisted of robes, and amounted to two and a half tons weight, which caused a draught of only about four inches. These boats, in one form or another, saw extensive service on Western rivers.

THE STEAMBOAT.

It has seldom happened in history that the introduction of labor-saving devices has not robbed society to some extent of what was poetic and sentimental, and replaced it by something more prosaic and matter of fact. The Missouri river steamboat was an exception, for with all the romance that attached to the old keelboat, its own history was more romantic still. The sight of one of these noble vessels, standing high above the water line and well above the highest banks, its white form sharply outlined against the foliage of the bottoms, its lofty chimneys pouring out clouds of smoke, its apparent ease in stemming the swift current, and finally, its strange and supernatural appearance to the rude inhabitants of the prairies, gave it a character distinctly its own. It was found to accomplish a great saving over the cost of the keelboat, and it consequently came rapidly into use, at first in the fur trade, and later in every kind of business, public or private, that was transacted along the river. No feature of frontier life is more intimately blended with the history of the Western country than the Missouri river steamboat.