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MOUNTAIN BOATS AND GRASSHOPPERS

There is no record as to how well the *Western Engineer* served its purpose in awing the Indians, although one redskin was critical of the white man's morality when he said, "White man, bad man, keep a great spirit chained and build fire under it to make it work a boat."

The government boat was a good Missouri River vessel for its draught only nineteen inches. The fact that it failed to reach even the halfway point on its voyage to the Yellowstone was apparently due to poor management rather than the deficiency of the vessel. It reached Fort Lisa, near present-day Omaha, before laying over for the winter. By the next spring Congress had lost interest in the expedition. The *Western Engineer* came back downstream, made a short and purposeless trip up the Mississippi to the foot of the Des Moines rapids and then disappeared from history.

The Missouri was not conquered to the mouth of the Yellowstone by steam for more than a decade after the abortive government expedition. Then, in 1830, Pierre Chouteau, manager at St. Louis for the American Fur Company, wrote to his New York office proposing that the company build "a small steamboat for the trade of the upper Missouri. We believe that the navigation will be much safer in going up, and possibly also in coming down, than it is by keelboat. . . . Such a boat as we require we think will cost in Cincinnati or Marietta about \$7,000." When John Jacob Astor gave his consent, the 130-foot *Yellowstone* was built by the fur company and started for the river for which she was named. On the first trip she was stopped by low water at Fort Tecumseh, which was renamed Fort Pierre in honor of Pierre Chouteau, whose contribution to Missouri steamboating is commemorated in the name of South Dakota's capital city.

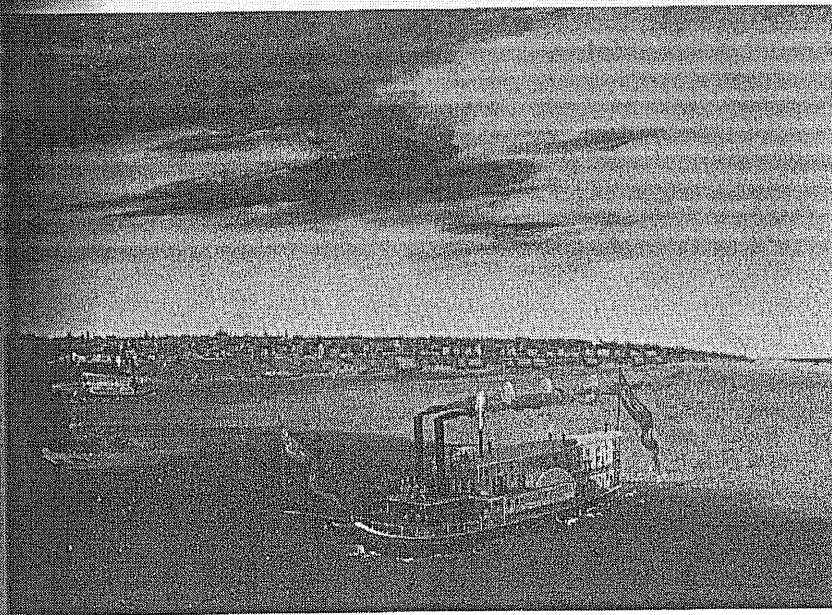
On her second trip, in 1833, the little vessel reached the fur company's Fort Union at the mouth of the Yellowstone and returned to St. Louis "with a full cargo of buffalo robes, furs and peltries, besides ten thousand pounds of buffalo tongues." John Jacob Astor congratulated Chouteau from Paris, writing, "Your voyage in the *Yellowstone* attracted much attention in Europe and has been noted in all the papers here." Of more consequence was the attitude of the Indians. Many who had been trading with the Hudson's Bay Company started to come to the American fur post, saying, "The British might turn out their dogs and burn their sledges, as they would no longer be useful while the Fire Boat walked on the waters."

Twenty-seven more years would elapse before steamboats reached the head of navigation of the Missouri at Fort Benton in the foothills of the Rockies of western Montana. The fur company vessels *Chippewa* and the *Key West* first ascended the river to this distant point, 3,600 miles from the mouth of the Mississippi and 3,300 feet above sea level, in 1860. In

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all it took over forty years to evolve the boats, the experience and the maneuvers required to navigate the Missouri.

Most of these maneuvers had to do with getting off or over sand bars. Upriver travel, except in the highest water, was slow and laborious work. The most pedestrian means of getting through low water was to lighten the cargo in barges towed for the purpose or double-trip it by piling half on the bank and making two trips through the low spots. Virtually all the vessels were stern-wheelers, and when one grounded it was sometimes possible to get off by reversing the wheel to send a rush of water under the boat and so lift the bow. Or a boat might pull itself through



THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Built by the American Fur Company, the 130-foot *Yellowstone* was the first steamboat to reach Fort Union at the upper end of the Missouri River. Indians who had formerly traded with the Hudson's Bay Company began bringing their furs to the American post, saying that the British dogs and sledges "would no longer be useful while the Fire Boat walked on the waters." In the above picture the *Yellowstone* is shown at St. Louis.

identify. The Negroes were taken ashore, where those who were not killed started their journey back to slavery.

Captain LaBarge had the misfortune to be persecuted by both sides. At St. Joseph his *Emilie* picked up some southern sympathizers as passengers, and they gave a loud cheer for Jefferson Davis as the boat pulled into the river. Word of this was wired to Fort Leavenworth, where a group of irate citizens decided, quite unreasonably, to hang LaBarge when his vessel arrived. The lynch mob was waiting on the levee when a friend of LaBarge's jumped aboard before the gangplank was lowered to warn him not to land. The prudent captain made no further stops until he reached the safety of St. Louis. On another occasion when his vessel was under contract to the Union forces, the Confederates seized it and forced him to return upstream to convey General Price, who was ill, to safety. Although LaBarge obtained a letter from Price saying that he had acted under duress, Union General Lyons placed him under arrest when he returned, and the confiscation of his vessel was prevented only by a good friend on Lyons' staff. In the no-man's-land of Missouri during the Civil War no steamboat was safe, but the profits were tremendous.

In the early 1850s mountain men in the far Northwest, perhaps inspired by the California gold strike, started poking into the ground and rooting around in streams. Gold was discovered on the Salmon and Clearwater rivers in Idaho, and a small stream of prospectors began to flow up the Missouri and the Columbia and to trek overland from Salt Lake. Then a strike was made in Montana about fifty miles from present-day Butte, and some of the parties headed for Idaho decided to go to this new location. The business built slowly until, in 1863, a rich lode was uncovered at Alder Gulch on the Jefferson Fork of the Missouri. The next year a still richer strike was made at Last Chance Gulch and the Montana gold rush started. Overnight Virginia City sprang up at Alder Gulch and attained a population of 10,000 in two years. The town that arose at Last Chance Gulch was named Helena and outdistanced her Alder Gulch rival to become the state capital.

During the last half of the 1860s steamboating to the head of navigation became a bonanza business. Only six boats arrived at Fort Benton during the four years after the *Key West* and the *Chippewa* made the initial voyage. In 1866-67 seventy boats reached the outpost, bringing twenty quartz mills and ten thousand gold-hungry passengers. The *Deer Lodge* wintered at Fort Benton in 1866. On her way down in the spring she passed forty boats struggling up the stream packed to the guards with people, oxen, mules, wagons, tools, food, and other freight. There was an alternate route to the mines from the east, the overland Montana Road that ran from Fort Laramie on the North Platte River to the headwaters of the Yellowstone. The Sioux and Cheyenne prevented travel along this

route so successfully that it was practically abandoned in 1866, leaving the Missouri, which ran within a hundred miles of the diggings, as the only access to the golden wealth of the mountains.

A picture of steamboating during the gold rush was left in the memoirs of Captain Grant Marsh, who brought the *Luella* to Fort Benton in the spring of 1866. Before the precious metal had been found near it, the fort had been a quiet, well-ordered place, with discipline maintained among both Indians and whites by the fur company. Now it was a sprawling, muddy collection of tents, shacks, warehouses, and saloons selling whiskey at forty cents a drink and offering girls who were *persona non grata* in more civilized communities. There was no official law; such order as existed was ruthlessly maintained by a Vigilante Committee. One of the *Luella's* crew who stole a bottle of high-alcohol-content patent medicine was flogged almost to death, and the vigilantes told Marsh that they had come within three votes of hanging him.

Shortly after her arrival the *Luella* performed a mission that, though it was not evident at the time, marked the beginning of the end of fur trade on the Missouri. Fort Union at the mouth of the Yellowstone had long been the greatest Indian trading post in the United States—Fort Benton was an outpost. Now the fur company was closing the lower post and the *Luella* went down to pick up its supplies.

Marsh made another short downstream trip to rescue the cargo and passengers and salvage the machinery of the stranded *Marion*. Profits from the gold-rush trade were so enticing that some deeper-draft lower-river boats tried to share them by going upstream where they did not belong. The *Marion* was one of several that did not make it.

The *Luella* was the last boat to leave Benton in September 1866, and carried the largest single shipment of gold dust ever brought down the river—\$1,250,000 worth—and the 230 miners to whom it belonged. Although the cargo was light, the *Luella* was a long time loading. Each handful of the supposedly golden grains with which the miners paid their fares had to be washed before the clerk's vigilant eye to make sure that it had not been adulterated with sand. The miners carried their wealth in money belts around their waists. When the *Luella* first grounded, a passenger who engaged to help the crew get her off fell overboard. The water was only two feet deep but the current was strong and the weight of his hard-won wealth was so great that he was swept downstream and drowned.

Near the abandoned Fort Union the *Luella* was hailed by a beautiful Cuban girl astride a horse on the bank. The presence of a luscious Latin at the mouth of the Yellowstone was due to the army's decision to build little Fort Buford near the site of Fort Union; the girl on horseback was a captain's wife who had ridden from the fort when she heard the approach-

ing vessel. The hazards of the country were pointed up when the captain's wife, while riding the short distance back to the fort to tell her husband that they had company, was ambushed by Indians, and only a sharp application of her spurs saved her from what was then seriously described as "a fate worse than death."

The *Luella* herself had her brush with Indians a few miles farther downstream. The savages had probably been following the vessel at some distance back from the river bank, waiting for her to get into trouble. Their chance came when the *Luella* grounded under a high bluff in a manner that required grasshoppering. As the crew started to set the spars the Indians attacked from the bluff, shooting down to make the deck untenable. The best shots among the passengers crouched behind the stacks and the pilothouse and picked off those redskins rash enough to expose themselves to fire while the crew returned to its work.

The gold rush introduced the last phase of steamboating on the upper Missouri and its tributaries—serving the army in the Indian Wars that were at their height during the 1860s and '70s. The white man's lust for gold contributed the final straw to the red man's accumulated injustices. Supposedly iron-clad treaties reserved to the Indians the lands in which the gold was found, except for white traders. But treaties could not stop gold-hungry immigrants, and when the army came to protect them the Sioux and Blackfoot took to the warpath.

In the several campaigns against the Indians, steamboats figured large in the logistics. The first big expedition against the Sioux, in 1864, involved some 4,000 men, under General Sully, and eight steamboats: the *Marcella*, *Sam Gaty*, *Chippewa Falls*, *General Grant*, *Isabella*, *Tempest*, *Alone*, and *Island City*. They neither fought nor chased Indians, but served as movable supply bases for the horse soldiers who did the fighting and chasing, and they connected and supplied the many far-flung river-bank outposts the army established in the Indian country. As Sully's horsemen moved overland from stream to stream, the steamers pushed far beyond previous civilization to replenish their rations and ammunition and take out the wounded.

This campaign ended on the Yellowstone when, in mid-August, the weary, heat-crazed troopers reached the bank of that shallow stream and found the *Chippewa Falls* and the *Alone* awaiting them with much-needed food. The *Island City* was supposed to be there, but it had been snagged at the mouth of the tributary and had sunk, taking with it the material with which Sully had planned to equip a fort up the stream. After feeding the army the two vessels ferried it across the river for its march back to Fort Union. Then the army had to help the boats. The water had fallen so low that it was necessary to use cavalry horses to drag them over low-water spots on their voyage back to the Missouri.

The vessel of greatest renown in the Indian wars was the *Far West*, captained by the same Grant Marsh who had taken the largest gold shipment down the Missouri. This vessel's claim to fame was based primarily on her minor involvement in "Custer's Last Stand" in 1876. She began the campaign as a supply vessel for the command of General Terry, of which Custer's cavalry was a part. Terry's troops had marched out from Fort Lincoln at Bismarck, North Dakota, to rendezvous with General Gibbons' command on the Yellowstone at the mouth of the Powder River. As soon as the ice permitted, Marsh brought the *Far West* up to Fort Lincoln, loaded her with 200 tons of supplies, and set out for the camp on the Yellowstone.

Grant Marsh had been selected for this assignment because he was the only steamboat captain who knew the Yellowstone. The preceding year General Philip Sheridan, in extreme command in the West, had sent him exploring up that stream in another vessel, the *Josephine*. The logistics of the coming campaign were to be determined by how far steamboats could get up the Yellowstone to supply the troops. There was also a scientific aspect to the expedition, which included several professors from the Smithsonian Institution.

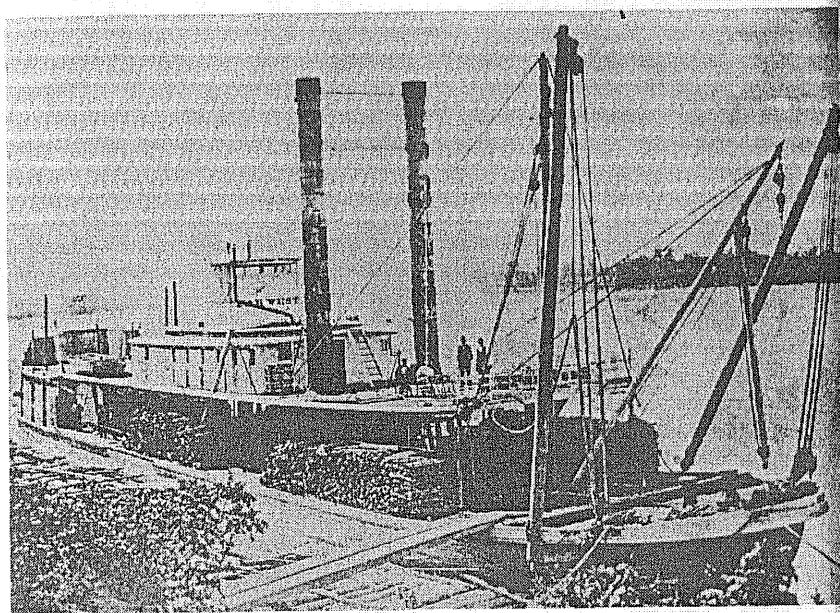
Beyond its lower reaches the Yellowstone was virgin territory for a steamboat, but the *Josephine* had no great difficulty getting up to the mouth of the Big Horn. The current was fairly swift, four to six miles an hour, but the water was at its spring crest with a minimum depth of eight feet. As the vessel plowed along the scientists measured the length of the river in a rather ingenious manner. The hurricane deck was 150 feet long. Two men stationed at the front of it took turns walking to the stern, carefully keeping abreast of an object on the shore. Each time a man reached the stern the vessel had traveled 150 feet. The number of trips from bow to stern, multiplied by 150, indicated the length of the river.

When the Big Horn River was reached the explorers were surprised at its size and volume. It was fully 450 yards wide and had a powerful current. Marsh pushed the nose of the *Josephine* 12 miles up this stream out of curiosity and then returned to his assigned task of further exploring the Yellowstone. Beyond the Big Horn travel on the main stream became more difficult. The current at one place raced at nine miles an hour, a torrent which the *Josephine*, under a full head of steam, could barely match. She was sparrowed through to quieter water and steamed on to Pompey's Pillar, a landmark famed from the Lewis and Clark expedition. High on this tall tower of yellow sandstone, rising from the floor of a valley, was carved "Wm. Clark, July 25th, 1806." Marsh climbed up to engrave below this, "*Josephine*, June 3rd, 1875."

The vessel pushed on with increasing difficulty, repeatedly warping and sparring her way through rapids and inching through island-hemmed

chutes that were scarcely wider than her hull, until she finally struggled through a stretch of white water that her crew named Hell Roaring Rapids. A party that reconnoitered ahead on foot reported that the river beyond this point was so broken up by islands that the vessel could not get through. The *Josephine* was then 483 miles from the mouth of the Yellowstone and within 60 miles of the northeast corner of what is now Yellowstone National Park. Marsh's report to General Sheridan to the effect that the Yellowstone was readily navigable in the spring to the mouth of the Big Horn determined the strategy of the 1876 campaign, which would take the troops into the heart of the Indian country.

When, during this campaign, the *Far West* reached the rendezvous point at the mouth of the Powder River she found Gibbons' command on one side of the Yellowstone and Terry and Custer on the other. She unloaded



FREDERICK WAY, JR.

Remembered chiefly for her role in Custer's Last Stand, the supply vessel Far West served on the upper Missouri during the Indian Wars. In her cabin General Custer planned his campaign against the Indians in 1876, and two days later Custer's Indian scout, Curly, returned to the Far West with the first reports of the massacre.

her supplies, returned downstream for more, and then became Terry's headquarters. In her cabin Generals Terry, Gibbons, and Custer planned the tactics that would lead the impetuous cavalry commander to his death in one of the most famous battles in American history. The battle plan was simply a pincer movement by Custer's cavalry and Gibbons' infantry that would envelop the Indians, whose trail had been discovered leading into the valley of the Little Big Horn River. While the brass conferred in the cabin a more tense battle was waged around a poker table in the pilot-house, involving Marsh, Custer's younger brother Tom, and three infantry officers. According to Marsh, Captain Crowell of the Sixth Infantry walked away from the game in the wee hours of the morning richer by several thousand dollars.

After Custer marched out with twelve troops of the Seventh Cavalry the *Far West* ferried Gibbons' troops across the river and then followed them upstream to the mouth of the Big Horn, where eight days' rations were issued from the supplies on the boat. Then General Terry ordered the vessel to proceed up the Big Horn, if possible to the mouth of the Little Big Horn, to establish a forward supply base. After the first few miles, which Marsh had traversed the previous year, this proved to be an almost continual process of warping against the strong current. Troops carried a cable along the shore and fastened it to a tree, and the capstan pulled the boat forward. On the second day the river became so narrow that cables were put ashore on each bank and both port and starboard capstans were used to pull the boat up the middle of the river. While the men were sweating at this work they watched tall columns of smoke in the sky farther up the valley, caused, they believed, by the burning of Indian teepees by the victorious white troops.

On the afternoon of the second day the *Far West* reached the mouth of the Little Big Horn and was moored to an island in midstream to guard against attack, after which everybody started to fish for the salmon, pike, and catfish with which the river abounded. They were so engaged when a mounted Indian broke through the willows on the bank, saving himself from being shot by a trigger-happy trooper by frantically making the peace sign. The redskin proved to be Custer's scout Curly. On the deck of the *Far West* the Crow scout, who spoke no English, drew a diagram of a little circle full of dots that he indicated were white men, surrounded by a larger circle with many more dots to which he pointed as he repeatedly said, "Sioux, Sioux." He then made signs for being hit by bullets and scalped, and crossed out the dots in the little circle. Thus, on the deck of the *Far West*, was filed the first report of Custer's Last Stand.

The next day an exhausted white courier, pursued by Indians to within sight of the boat, arrived with news from the infantry column that had reached the battlefield to find the scalped and mutilated bodies of Custer

and five troops of the Seventh Cavalry. Major Reno, Custer's subordinate, and the remaining seven troops of the Seventh Cavalry had fought another action a few miles from the massacre site and held the Indians off for two days until relieved by the infantry. The *Far West* was to prepare to receive Reno's wounded and take dispatches back to civilization. Under the direction of a doctor who was aboard, the crew and soldiers cleared the open deck aft of the boilers and piled it eighteen inches deep with fresh grass cut from the marshlands along the river, over which they placed tarpaulins to form a gigantic, soft bed. Then, as night fell, parties went up the valley to make fires at intervals to light the stretcher bearers and guide them to the vessel. About two o'clock in the morning the sad column stumbled through the flickering firelight to lay fifty-two groaning wounded on the king-sized bed of the *Far West*.

Before the *Far West* pulled out a lieutenant of the Seventh Cavalry who had been detached with Terry appeared on the bank with the sole survivor of the Custer massacre, the horse Comanche, mount of one of the troop captains. A grass-carpeted stall was hastily constructed at the stern of the vessel and the wounded animal was tenderly led aboard.

The dispatches that the *Far West* brought out from the mouth of the Little Big Horn to Bismarck, North Dakota, were the world's first news of the Custer massacre. The vessel then crossed the river to Fort Lincoln to carry the tragic news to the twenty-eight newly bereaved widows at that outpost.

Grant Marsh was not finished with the aftermath of the Custer massacre. Sitting Bull, who commanded the Sioux, had fled to Canada. When he voluntarily surrendered with a few destitute followers six years later, the *W. J. Behan*, commanded by Marsh, brought the captives down the Missouri. In Canada the Sioux chief had learned to write his name. He had also learned the value of money. When crowds gathered at each stop the vessel made he regally acceded to requests for his autograph—at a dollar per signature. Somewhere along the line Captain Marsh was presented with a handsomely carved pipe, to which Sitting Bull took a fancy. As Marsh told the story, the Indian offered to buy it. Not wanting to sell a gift, Marsh set a price of fifty dollars. Through an interpreter the chief grunted that fifty dollars was too much money. "Tell him," said Marsh to the interpreter, "that he has kept me scared for twenty years along the river and he ought to give me something for that." With dignity Sitting Bull retorted, "I did not come on your land to scare you. If you had not come on my land you would not have been scared, either."

It took forty-one years, from 1819 to 1860, for steamboats gradually to work their way up to the head of navigation of the Missouri. It took about thirty years for steamboating to wither away on that stream as the rail-

roads inexorably reached farther and farther upstream. As elsewhere, the initial effect of the railroad was to give an impetus to the steamboats that carried people and goods on from the railhead, but as the railhead advanced, steamboating languished behind it.

The Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad reached St. Joseph, on the western boundary of Missouri, in 1859, at which time that city partially supplanted St. Louis as the terminal for the upper-river traffic. True, a line of packets briefly flourished running south to Kansas City and north to Sioux City, but when the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad reached the latter city in 1868, lower-river steamboat traffic again declined. And so it went through the 1870s and '80s. Immediately after the famed golden spike was driven at Ogden, Utah, to complete the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869, a freight spur was thrown up to Helena. In 1872 the Northern Pacific reached Bismarck. The final blow was delivered in 1883 when the main line of the Great Northern Railroad reached the upper Missouri valley and fostered the town of Great Falls, Montana, a few miles above Fort Benton and beyond the reach of the steamboats. The great fur-trading and gold-mining days when the old post was the commercial center were gone; it declined (present population 1,500) as its new rival on the shining rails grew. The last steamboat left Fort Benton in 1890.