

# Riverboats And Yankton

Steamboats Made Yankton A Vital Frontier Outpost – And Almost Made It A Whole Lot More

BY DOUG HAAR  
For the Press & Dakotan

The whistle could be heard for miles around, word spread quickly from the loud voice bellowing in the street: "Steamboat! A steamboat is coming!" Everyone emptied out of the ram shackle stores and bars that lined the dirt paths called streets and headed for the levee as word of the boat's arrival spread quickly.

Once the boat had approached the levee the bell on board would ring and the deck hands, called "roustabouts," would prepare for landing. These unique figures would go about their work singing very "colorful" songs as they began a ritual well rehearsed up and down the river. The order was given by one of the boats officers: "prepare the boat for landing!"

And with this these river-faring men would then set about their business in a fashion that appeared to many to be like a choreographed scenario in preparation for tying up the boat that measured more than a hundred feet in length while dealing with the swift current and more often than not wind. The gangplank lowered and the boat secured by extremely large ropes the unloading the passengers and cargo commenced and while it did the townspeople watched as this was considered to be ... entertainment.

Steamboats arriving in Yankton, Vermillion and dozens of other small towns that dotted the American frontier were welcomed by the citizenry as welcomed celebrities. The boats brought the indispensable supplies for their survival, as well as news from the rest of the world, as well as a bit of culture to the virtual wilderness of the frontier.

The frontier towns all looked the same for the most part, complete with dirt or mud streets depending on the season. The buildings that were made of wood and canvass were set up by the business pioneers that worked them and lived in them as well. Those that were well off often had separate living quarters perhaps a "soddie" — homes made of sod that were functional, warm in the winter and cool in the summer, but needless to say, full of unwanted guests.

This was Yankton, Dakota. These hardy folks welcomed the boats and their crews and thirsted for the news that they brought and the cargoes that they carried. This was their only contact with the "civilized world."

On many occasions, the arrival of the steamboats provided a bit of culture, a venue for celebrations. The boats themselves were used as the dance halls that did not exist in these early frontier towns. The steamboat would be decorated and well lit for an evening of music celebration and feasting the whole town turning out for the event one night in Yankton and the next in Vermillion. The steamboats were known for their excellent cuisine and extravagant settings — and as one can imagine, fine dining (with the added bonus of music) were hard to come by in this era.

The steamboat business was unique and very profitable; owners could pay for the boat in one trip.

However, it was also extremely risky. Steamboat captains more often than not needed the 19th century equivalent of a GPS and that was a pilot who could guide the large craft through the snags and shallows safely to their destinations. Boaters today below Gavins Point Dam can relate to the dangers of navigating the river in an 18-foot boat let alone one that measured more than 180 feet and stood more than 40 feet.

Wind, current, snags and fire all took a great number of boats to the sandy bottom of the Mighty Mo.



This vintage photo shows three steamboats — from left, the *Westerna*, *Benton* and *Ida Rees* at part at the Yankton landing in 1878. The riverboat industry was vital to 19th century life as the Missouri River often provided the only connection to the east. The steamboat industry flourished until the railroad pushed west into the frontier and basically took the steam out of the riverboat industry.

P&D ARCHIVE PHOTO

Owners — usually, not the captains — chose the pilots and chose them carefully. These men were paid handsomely; in fact they were paid more than the captains, with the exception of men like Sanford Coulson and Grant Marsh, who as captains also piloted the boats themselves at times. Each boat set out to make a reputation in order to attract business, and while pilots were important to the boats, they were also judged on the ability of their chefs as well as the quality of the entertainment. Once dinner was completed and the tables were cleared the gaming began while in some cases music was also provided. The bar was always open. Anyone wishing to be a bartender contracted with the captain and paid a very lucrative fee to have the honor and/or privilege of tending bar on a steamboat. The gaming tables were under a similar arrangement as were other forms of entertainment.

**YANKTON PROUDLY CELEBRATES RIVERBOAT**  
Days each year for a good reason as this industry, perhaps more than any other, allowed this tiny village on the plains to become the Mother City of the Dakotas and the first capital of Dakota Territory.

Yankton was literally the trade terminus in the upper Missouri River area that all military forts relied upon. When J.B. Todd and D. Frost decided on a location to build a town, they chose Yankton because of its natural levee. In 1832, the *Yellowstone* passed by this natural levee being the first steamboat to navigate the

Muddy Mo while traveling up river to bring down a valuable load of furs for John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. Years later, Todd and Frost succeeded in their negotiations with the Yankton Dakota and their Chief Strike the Rhee, and "Yankton," Dakota, was founded.

For a little more than a quarter-century, the steamboat played a pivotal role in this area, serving as the main means of transportation and communication with the outside world. Steamboats brought the wares and tools to be sold, the lumber and livestock to begin yet another settlement along the frontier. Immigrants, pioneers, soldiers, veterans, miners, politicians, individuals practicing some of the oldest of trades, and missionaries added to the population panorama that made up Dakota Territory. One could work off one's passage and often times this happened, sort of an indentured servanthood to make one's stake in the west. One of these was my great-grandfather, who came to Yankton aboard a Coulson boat and arrived, so the story goes, with 10 cents in this pocket. He worked unloading steamboats for a year and finally had enough to strike out on his own and claim land under the Homestead Act.

Gold had been discovered in Montana in the 1860s, causing a gold rush and a boom in steamboat business, and shortly after the Civil War, steamboat captain extraordinaire Grant Prince Marsh, Union steamboat veteran of Shiloh and other battles in the

western theater, once again made history. Marsh received his first command in 1866; he was to serve as the captain and pilot of the *Luella*. Marsh and the *Luella* left St. Louis bound for Fort Benton with passengers and cargo on April 18, 1866. The *Luella*'s pilot house, like other steamers, was armored with boilerplate to protect the occupants from Indian bullets. Marsh and the *Luella* made it safely up river, 60 days out of St. Louis.

In the fall of 1868, Marsh made history by taking down the largest load of gold dust valued at \$1,250,000, and 230 miners. Incredible profits were made for boat owners that took the risks and entered the mountain trade. It was estimated that \$25 million worth of gold came out of Montana in 1865. One trip would provide enough profits that a boat could be entirely paid off. Such an environment would prove incentive for many an industrializing businessman. Traveling on a steamboat from St. Louis to Fort Benton, Montana Territory, ran \$150 for deck travel and as high as \$350 for cabin passage with meals in 1868.

The boom days of the steamboat era on the Upper Missouri River did not last long. Steamboats during the latter part of the 19th century relied heavily on the railroads for delivering the same cargo to the riverbanks that sustained their own livelihood. The

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