

Introduction

Senator Lyman Trumbull's visit to Helena, the new capital of Montana Territory, had been well heralded, and the crowd that gathered before the Planter's House between eight and nine o'clock on the evening of his arrival—August 13, 1869—nearly filled Broadway. The citizenry had a particular reason for wishing to honor the senator; he was an advocate of transcontinental railroads. In fact, he had just journeyed to the Pacific Coast on the newly completed Union Pacific–Central Pacific line, and was returning homeward when he struck out from Corinne, Utah, to see something of that great territory to the north that, even then, yearned for railroad ties.

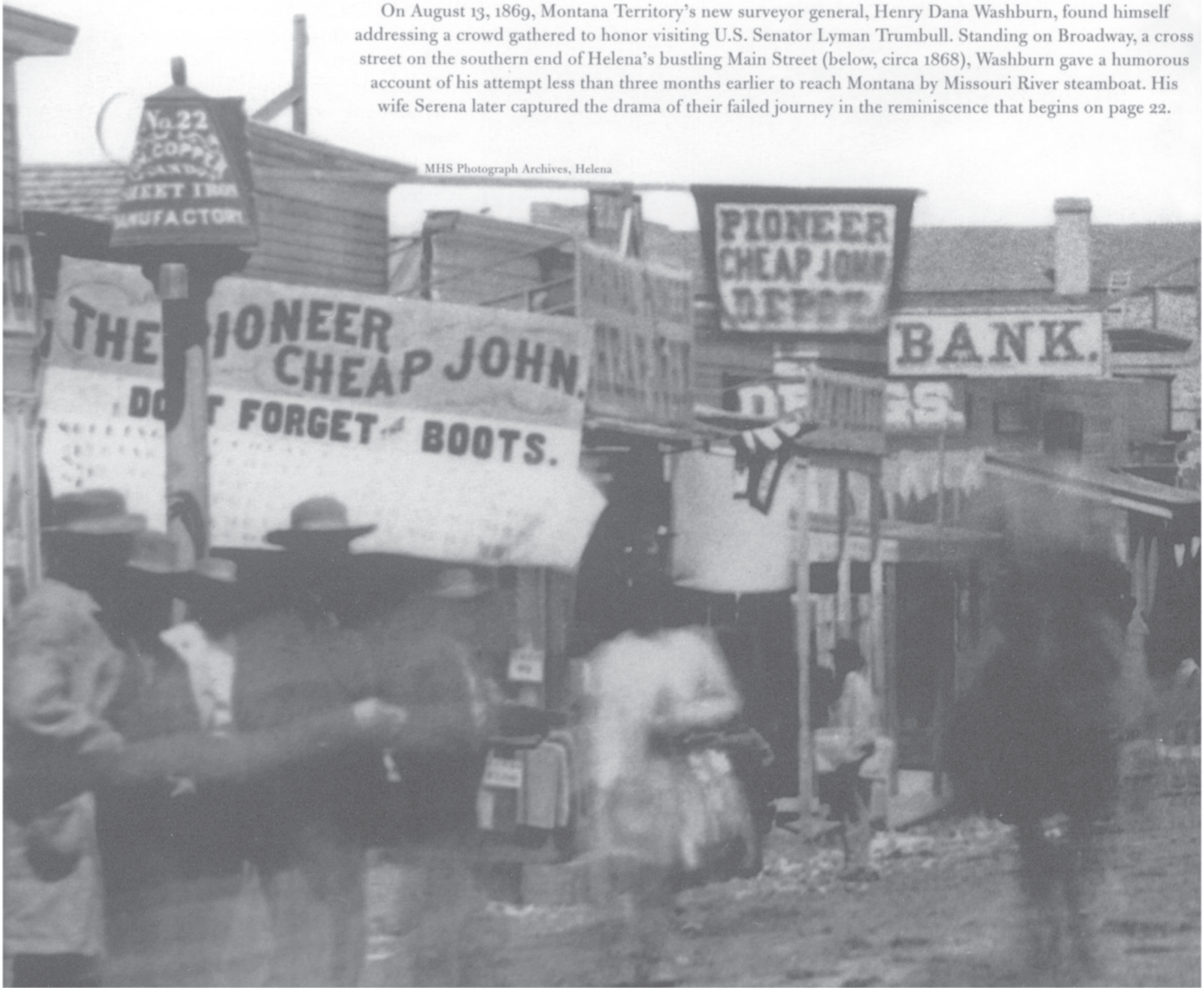
It was a fine, mild evening. The national colors on neighboring housetops barely stirred in the soft mountain breeze, the Helena brass band exhausted its repertoire, and finally, Senator Trumbull stepped to the edge

of the porch where editor Martin McGinnis introduced him to the crowd and left him to address the sea of upturned faces dimly lighted by a bonfire. After a light-hearted recital of his western experiences on the transcontinental line and in California, the senator got around to the subject dearest to his audience, remarking, "This railroad of the north is a certainty, and completion only a matter of time." A lengthy assurance that he intended to do everything in his power to promote their favorite project—the construction of a Northern Pacific railroad—left the people in too jovial a mood to disperse just then; they wanted more.

Another newcomer, General Henry Dana Washburn, who had arrived that day to take up his position as surveyor general of Montana Territory, was beckoned. Detaching himself from the crowd, General Washburn entertained the gathering with a humorous account of his attempt to reach Montana by way of the

On August 13, 1869, Montana Territory's new surveyor general, Henry Dana Washburn, found himself addressing a crowd gathered to honor visiting U.S. Senator Lyman Trumbull. Standing on Broadway, a cross street on the southern end of Helena's bustling Main Street (below, circa 1868), Washburn gave a humorous account of his attempt less than three months earlier to reach Montana by Missouri River steamboat. His wife Serena later captured the drama of their failed journey in the reminiscence that begins on page 22.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



Missouri River. As the editor of the *Helena Weekly Herald* put it, he “made his ‘pint’ with every sentence, and convulsed his audience with laughter.”¹ That a voyage to Montana was really no joking matter is evident in the reminiscent account written later by his wife, Serena.² It is a tale of hardships and hard work, which barely got them into the territory—from whence a retreat, complete with shipwreck and an Indian scare, was necessary.

The distance from Clinton, Indiana (the home of the Washburns), to Helena, Montana, is approximately 1,300 miles, as the crow flies. A highway bus can take a

passenger through, with reasonable comfort, in a day and a night, while an airliner can accomplish the same transit, and quite luxuriously, in a matter of hours. By either means, the trip is made with certainty and very little strain. Such was not the case a century and a quarter ago. Montana Territory was then beyond the frontier; an insular community cut off from the settled East by vast plains, and from the developing West by rugged mountains. It was never reached easily in pre-railroad days (before 1883), and occasionally the effort required was too great—as Mrs. Washburn’s reminiscence reveals.³



A Voyage to Montana *Serena Washburn's Account of Her Trip* *up the Missouri River in 1869, Part 1*

by Aubrey L. Haines



Jhe traveler of 1869 bound for Montana Territory from the East had only two commercial routes to choose between. One was overland by transcontinental railway to the end of track, where, beginning in February, Wells, Fargo and Company's stages could convey passengers to Helena, Montana Territory, in sixty-six hours running time.⁴ On March 27, 1869, the Union Pacific Railroad designated the little Mormon town of Connor City (fifteen houses and 150 people) at the crossing of Bear River, as its junction with the Montana Road. General J. A. Williamson—one of the town's founders—then changed its name to Corinne, Utah Territory, and that "Burg on the Bear" became a lusty railroad construction town and terminus for the Montana Stage Line. On August 26, 1869, the *Helena Weekly Herald* reported that Wells, Fargo and Company had sold its stagecoach business to J. T. Gilmer and Munro Salisbury of Salt Lake City.⁵

The other commercial route to Montana was by steamboat up the Missouri River to Fort Benton or such other Montana landing as the seasonal fluctuations of the river allowed, with the journey completed from there by stage. At that time the river route probably appeared more dependable than the overland, and it was certainly cheaper. The fare for a passenger traveling from Omaha to Helena by the overland route is said to have been \$350 at the beginning of 1869, though it dropped rapidly as the rails approached the Bear River. By contrast, the fare from St. Louis by river route, meals included, varied from \$150 to \$200.⁶ Generally, the overland route was preferred by those who valued time—or had to travel when the steamboats were not running. The river route served, in addition to those with business along the river, the genteel, the frail, and some who were traveling for pleasure.

Since it was the river route that the Washburn family elected to use going to Montana, some generalities about navigation on the Missouri River are in order as background for the reminiscence. The first steamboat to operate upon the Missouri River was the *Independence*, which ascended for two hundred miles in 1819.⁷ In spring 1832, the American Fur Company's boat, the

Yellowstone, reached Fort Union at the mouth of its namesake river.⁸ (At the time Fort Union was the practical limit for steam navigation because the vessels then available were not adequate for a stream so full of obstacles as was the upper river.) In addition to snags and sandbars, common on the lower reaches, the hazards increased with the presence of large boulders, numerous rapids, and a sometimes unpredictable stream flow.

By the middle of the century, steamboat builders had developed vessels suitable for use on the upper Missouri. Shallow-draft stern-wheelers with balanced rudders remained manageable in the maelstrom created by the huge wheel, and thus it was possible to maneuver the flat-bottomed crafts (a hull design created by abandoning the deep cargo holds common to boats used on the lower river). Though not as maneuverable as side-wheel steamers, stern-wheelers had several advantages that made them good working boats for the "mountain trade." They were narrower and suffered less damage—particularly to the paddles—in the "chutes" above Cow Island, where clearance was often restricted. Also, the broader beam of the flat-hull design provided more cargo space.⁹ Steamers drawing as little as eighteen inches of water were built, though the draft of a vessel of two-hundred-tons burden averaged about thirty inches and could be as much as four feet fully loaded.

In spring 1859 the American Fur Company sent such a boat up the Missouri River. It was the *Chippewa*, which managed to reach a point only fifteen miles below Fort Benton, discharging its freight at Brulé Bottom.¹⁰ The *Chippewa* reached Fort Benton the following year, accompanied by an ungainly lower-river side-wheeler, the *Key West*.¹¹ But this voyage was beset with such tremendous difficulties—the boats were pulled with ropes over several rapids by the soldiers being transported to Fort Benton—that the "mountain trade," as navigation of the Missouri above Fort Union was termed, was not popular until the discovery of gold on the headwaters of the Missouri River in 1862. The increased civil and military traffic escalated passenger and freight rates to a level where the profit from a single round-trip could exceed the value of a vessel. That possibility tempted many owners to put their boats into

1. *Helena Weekly Herald*, August 19, 1869.

2. Serena J. Washburn, "Autobiography of Serena J. Washburn," typed reminiscence (bound in green suede), two copies, fifty-four pages each (hereafter Washburn Autobiography). One, donated by Mary Washburn Rodriguez to the Yellowstone National Park Research Library, Mammoth, Wyoming, on August 17, 1965, is marked for one of Serena's grandsons and reads "Henry E. Washburn, Clinton, Indiana, Christmas 1904" on the inside of the flyleaf. The other, held by Washburn Payne DeMotte of New York City, is similar except for the inscription on the flyleaf indicating it was given to another grandson with the inscription "John B. DeMotte, Jr., December 1903, Greencastle, Indiana." This copy also has notes from the *Biographical Dictionary of Congress* handwritten inside the back cover by Lawrence Washburn DeMotte, probably on November 22, 1928.

3. "Montana has always been far off—in miles, in time, in facilities for getting there . . . it is almost an outside world." Ferdinand V. Hayden, *The Great American West* (Bloomington, Ill., 1880), 219.

4. Betty M. and Brigham D. Madsen, *North to Montana: Jehus, Bullwhacking, and Mule Skinners on the Montana Trail* (Salt Lake City, 1980), 173.

5. *Ibid.*, 164-65, 169, 174.

6. William E. Lass, *A History of Steamboating on the Upper Missouri River* (Lincoln, 1962), 41.

Each spring, mountain snowmelt swelled the upper Missouri's water level enough to afford steamboats a brief opportunity to travel all the way to Fort Benton (sketch at right, 1869), where fortune seekers disembarked to continue on to Montana's gold camps, touted by the advertisement below.



Fort and Stream, April 13, 1907

the risky business of service to Fort Benton, including many that were not suited to the upper river.

It was mentioned earlier that stream-flow changes were a problem in navigating the Missouri. An early rise, expected from mid-March to mid-April, resulted from the melting of the winter snow and the spring rains of the plains. This rise had little effect above the mouth of the Yellowstone River. A second, or June rise, was nourished by the melting of the mountain snows. This rise lasted from a few days to a few weeks and provided the water that allowed steamboats to negotiate the stair-stepped Missouri Breaks between Cow Island and Fort Benton. Ordinarily these two annual rises provided enough water—about three feet—to allow well-handled boats to reach Fort Benton, but the window of opportunity was often narrow.¹² Thus, the Washburns' late May departure from St. Louis cut the running time very close. Conventional operating rationale considered early July the latest a turnaround could be made at Fort Benton.¹³

1867
HO! FOR THE GOLD MINES!

FOR
FORT BENTON, HELRNA,
VIRGINIA CITY, BANNOCK CITY,
AND ALL POINTS IN THE MINING DISTRICTS.

THE NEW AND ELEGANT SIDE WHEEL

Passenger Steamer

WALTER B. DANCE,
J. R. SOUSLEY, Captain,
M. H. CRAPSTER, CLERK, J. O. HAYNES, CLERK,
Will leave for all points on the
Upper Missouri and the Mining Districts,
ON
the _____, at _____ M.
For Freight or Passage apply on board, at the foot of
Locust Street, or to
BOYD & SYLVESTER, Ag'ts.
312 Commercial St.

Montana The Magazine of Western History, vol. 1 (January 1931), p. 14

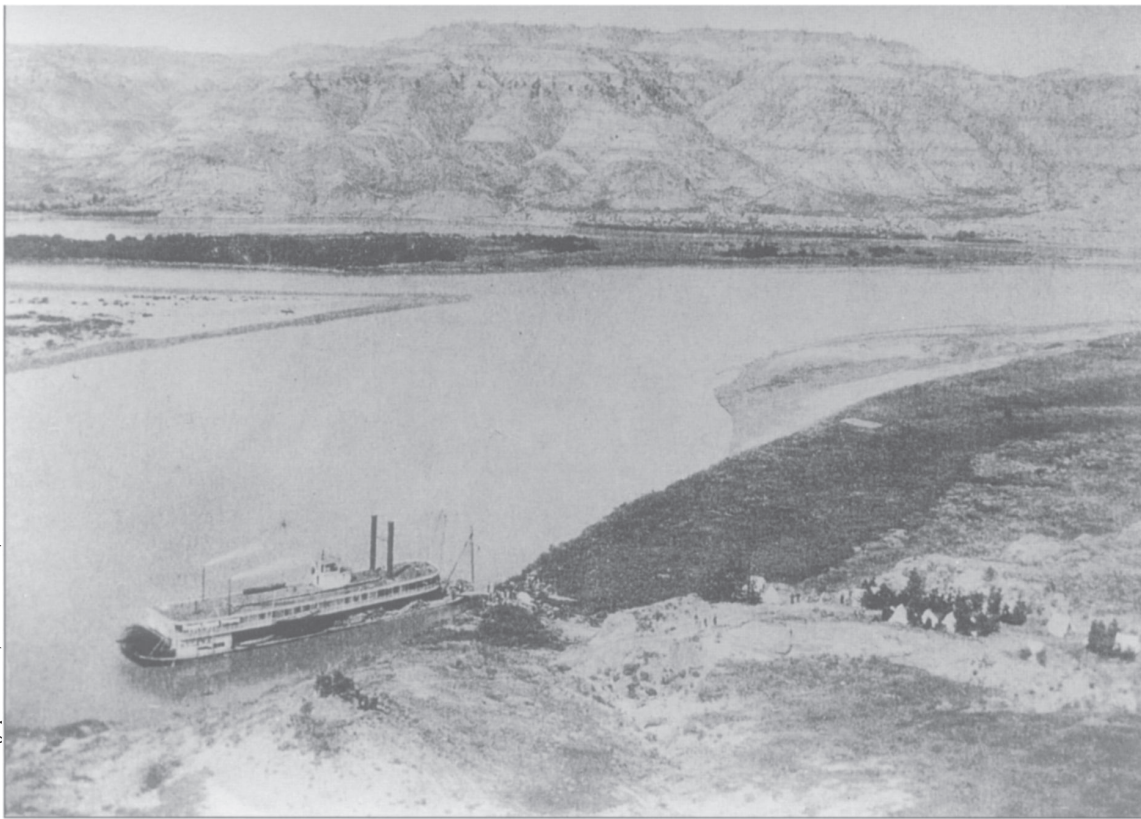
NORTH EAST VIEW
1869.

The effect of gold mining on river traffic above Fort Union can be seen in the number of landings at Fort Benton after 1864. In 1865 there were four vessels (with four more unloading at the mouth of the Marias River, twenty-seven miles below town). In 1866 the landings at Fort Benton increased to thirty-one, and then to thirty-seven landings in 1867. Landings in 1868 totaled thirty-five, and in 1869, twenty-four.¹⁴ The decrease in river traffic after 1867 had several causes, the most important of which was the declining importance of mining traffic as the gold boom years passed. That decline, however, was partly compensated by an increase in the transportation of personnel, equipment, and supplies for the military posts along the Missouri River. Likewise, an even greater decline in 1869, which might logically have been expected with completion of the transcontinental railway, did not occur because merchants and shippers were uncertain as to the date on which service could be expected to a point serving Montana Territory.¹⁵

The Washburn trip to Montana Territory began early in May 1869 when their party gathered at the steamboat landing at Clinton, Indiana, for the short trip down the Wabash River on the steamboat *Comet*, bound

7. Stanley Vestal, *The Missouri* (1945; reprint, Lincoln, 1996), 53.
8. *Ibid.*, 55.
9. Lass, *History of Steamboating*, 17.
10. *Ibid.*, 16. The *Chippewa* was a small stern-wheeler, 165 feet long, 30 feet in beam, and with a draft of 31 inches.
11. Martin Schmitt, ed., "From Missouri to Oregon in 1860: The Diary of August V. Kautz," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 37 (July 1946), 211.
12. Lass, *History of Steamboating*, 3, 4, 110.

13. *Ibid.*, 51. Charles P. Chouteau, "Early Navigation of the Upper Missouri River," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, 10 vols. (1876-1940; reprint, Boston, 1966), 7:256, estimated the time required for the trip as thirty-five days from St. Louis to Fort Benton (based on the performance of the *Chippewa* in 1859—probably too severe a standard for most boats and most conditions).
14. "Steamboat Arrivals at Fort Benton, Montana, and Vicinity," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, 1:317-25. As regards the figure for arrivals in 1869, it must be noted that eighteen of the twenty-four vessels listed double-tripped from Dauphine's Rapids to Fort Benton between June 5 and July 2.
15. Madsen, *North to Montana*, 168.



Cow Island Landing, shown above in 1878 with the second steamboat named *Helena*, was located almost two hundred river miles downstream from Fort Benton. In times of low water, steamboats often unloaded there to transfer cargo to freight wagons that then completed the trip to Fort Benton and beyond. Moving a boatload of merchandise by wagon could take multiple trips and, depending on the weather, several months to accomplish.

for Terre Haute and a railroad connection to St. Louis. There were eight in the party: Henry Dana Washburn, his wife Serena, their son Aquila and daughter Lelia, Nelse C. Anderson and his wife Thirza (Serena's half sister), Seymour Nebeker (Serena's half brother), and a friend of the family, Palmer Crabb.

General Washburn—a thirty-seven-year-old Indiana lawyer-soldier-congressman whose health was ravaged by his service in the Civil War—sought and received an appointment as Surveyor General of Montana Territory from President Ulysses S. Grant, in the hope that his consumption would be cured in the high, dry climate. Serena Johnson had met her future husband when he was a teacher at a one-room school on Helt's Prairie, Indiana, and she a student at another school nearer Clinton.¹⁶ They were married at her stepfather's home in Clinton on December 28, 1854, about a year after Washburn's graduation from the New York State and National Law School. She was thirty-three when she made the trip described in her reminiscence. A Brady photograph taken following the Civil War, while

Washburn was an Indiana congressman, shows three children. The girl facing her father is Lelia, who was born September 13, 1855, and thus was not yet fourteen years old at the time of the voyage. The boy—Aquila, born in 1858 and named after his step-grandfather on the maternal side—was ten years old. The little girl, Zoua, was not a member of the party that left for Montana Territory, and it seems likely she died in March 1868.¹⁷

Seymour Nebeker's presence with the Montana-bound Washburns is explained by entries in the General Land Office records that indicate he was subsequently employed in the Helena office as an assistant clerk, messenger, and deputy surveyor. He executed several survey contracts under Washburn and his successor, John Blaine.¹⁸

There is no explanation as to why the others, the Andersons and Palmer Crabb, elected to accompany the Washburns on their difficult journey to a far-off and largely primitive place where the struggle to transform a rough mining society into something more akin to

16. Washburn Autobiography, 16, 17.

17. *Ibid.*, 54. Serena seems to be saying that Zoua died eighteen months before her father; that is impossible since the Washburn party was en route to Montana Territory in July 1869. Historian Lee Parsons of Indianapolis, Indiana, who is preparing a biography of Henry

Dana Washburn, believes that Zoua's death occurred in the week of March 8, 1868, on the basis of an item in the Terre Haute newspaper that mentioned Washburn's passage through town en route to Clinton "to attend a serious illness in his family." Lee Parsons to author, January 26, 1997.



Courtesy the author

Famed Civil War photographer Mathew Brady photographed the Washburn family (left) after the war. Left to right are Serena, son Aquila, daughter Zoua (seated), daughter Lelia, and Henry. Zoua died before the trip to Montana. Serena's half brother, Seymour Nebeker (below, circa 1875) was one of four friends and relatives to accompany the Washburns on their trip up the Missouri River in 1869.



Robert Washburn/Robert Washburn House Collection

civilization was barely begun. What we do know is that they all “remained in St. Louis several days, taking in the sights of the city and waiting for the boat. At last *Submarine No. 14* was ready and we went on board with our piano and new household goods purchased in St. Louis.”¹⁹

It is important to note that Serena was sixty-seven years old at the time she recorded the events of 1869; her recollection of certain details thirty-five years later was at times hazy. The occasional use of day dates hints that Serena may have been able to refer to some form of memoranda made during the voyage, but that is only a speculation since no such primary record has yet been found. Compared with the diary of Sarah E. Canfield, an army wife who traveled up the Missouri from Omaha to Camp Cooke in 1867 and back down the river in 1868, Serena's backward glance is often incomplete and sometimes overly dramatic.²⁰ “In focusing in on just the Missouri River episode, with all the sketchiness and obvious errors or lapses of memory,” observes historian Lee Parsons, “one gets the unfair

impression that Serena was a gray and two-dimensional personality, when in fact she was quite a spirited lady.” Indeed, she was an ardent feminist who managed to convert her husband to that then uncommon viewpoint!

Serena Washburn's voyage to Montana Territory is presented here exactly as recorded in her reminiscence, with some clarifying information added in the footnotes. The account occupies twenty pages, beginning on page twenty-five of her manuscript. (Page changes are indicated by the bracketed numbers.)



18. Lee Parsons to author, April 20, 1997.

19. Washburn Autobiography, 24. *Submarine No. 14*—actually *No. 13*, as will be shown later—was one of a line of Mississippi River side-wheel steamers built by James B. Eads, a St. Louis civil engineer, whose heavily armored gunboats produced early in the Civil War were important in wresting control of the Mississippi River from the Confederates.

20. Ray H. Mattison, ed., “An Army Wife on the Upper Missouri: The Diary of Sarah E. Canfield, 1866–1868,” *North Dakota History*, 20 (October 1953), 191–220. The two women's accounts are similar in that neither are biased nor mere daily records. They differ greatly, however, in perception and accuracy of details. Mrs. Canfield's keen anecdotal sense makes for an interesting history.



The Voyage

We left St. Louis the 26th of May, 1869. The city, with its busy wharves and great buildings, was a beautiful sight as we left it behind and, viewed through the smoke and fog, seemed like a dream city. We soon covered twenty miles and found ourselves entering the mouth of the Missouri, whose boiling, whirling, turbulent waters were to rock us to sleep on its bosom for so many weeks.²¹ Even as far down as St. Louis, twenty-one miles, the Missouri with its muddy waters does not mingle with the waters of the Mississippi. We passed many towns nestling near the river's brink.²² We visited Fort Leavenworth and Omaha, and had our first sight of the Indians as they came straggling in past the white tents of the soldiers.²³

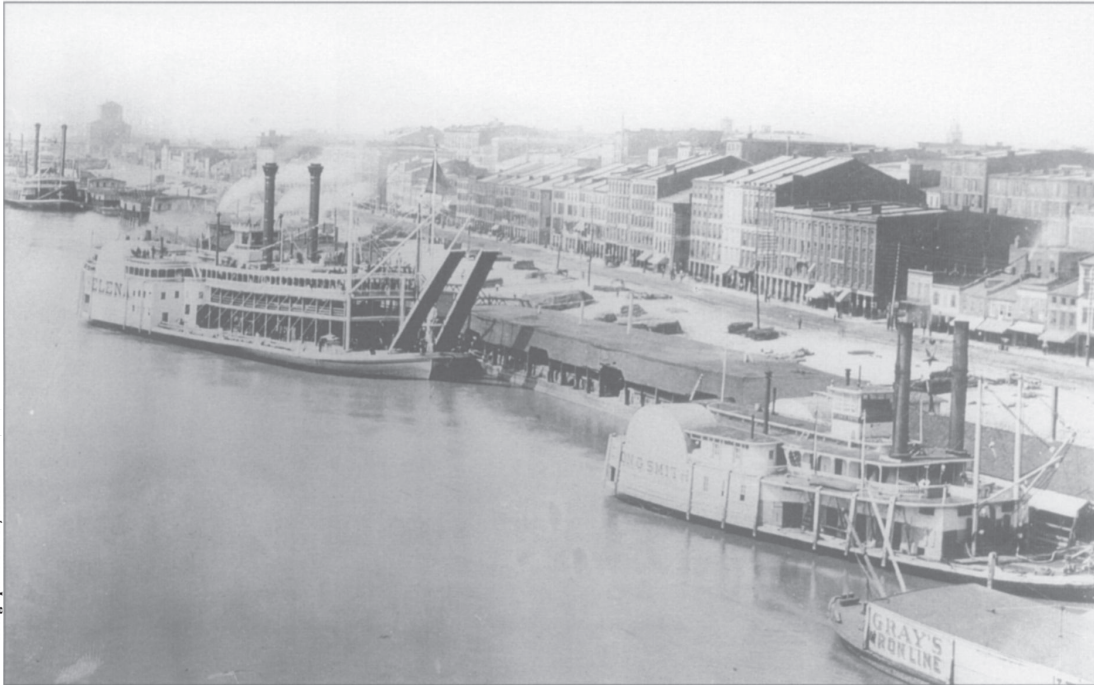
21. The distance from St. Louis to the mouth of the Missouri River is given as seventeen miles on the Mississippi River Commission's chart. The chart says 3,112 miles from St. Louis to Fort Benton. Unless otherwise noted, all Missouri River distances henceforth are from the table of "Distances from St. Louis," as estimated in 1867 (reprinted from the *Missouri Republican*), in *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 1 (January 1951). 22. A later source of mileages is from the "Map of the Missouri River from Its Mouth to the Three Forks, Montana" (84 sheets at the scale of 1=63,360, published by the Missouri River Commission, 1892-1895, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena). It shows the distance from St. Louis to Fort Benton to be 811 miles shorter.

22. Several of Serena's sentences that seem out of place near the start of page twenty-five of her typed autobiography probably belong here, i.e.: "The channel was never in the same place a week at a time, or I might say a day at a time. We saw a house or two remaining where once was a thriving village. It did not require much time for the river to take a fertile farm from one side of the river and move it to the other" (p. 25).

The second day, while enjoying our dinner, a thunderstorm came suddenly upon us, shattered a tree on the bank near our boat, knocked two of our men down, and blew down our large smokestack. The captain rushed in to quell our fears, saying excitedly, "General, don't be alarmed. Heat is a non-conductor. I never knew a boat to be struck by lightning."²⁴ We passed White Cloud and [saw] other Indians. Storms and hurricanes and sand-storms served to enliven our nights as well as our days. One day we were enjoying ourselves on deck watching Arion Rock in the rear, then on to Albany up the stream.²⁵ The view was inspiring, the sun played its changing light on [26] clouds and landscape. When suddenly, without warning, a black cloud overspread the sky, the wind gathered up the sand from the neighboring bank and showered it upon us, almost choking us, and we were swept into a whirl-

23. At Omaha, Washburn's party gained another member in the person of Thomas C. Bailey, who was waiting there to board *Submarine No. 13*. He was a thirty-four-year-old Indianian who served the Union cause throughout the Civil War, and was experienced in both civil engineering and law, which fitted him for the position of chief clerk of the surveyor general's office at Helena. In 1874 he moved to Salt Lake City where he established a practice as a land attorney. He died there September 2, 1900. See *Utah, Her Cities, Towns and Resources* (Chicago, 1891-1892), 149, microfilm; and *Salt Lake City Deseret News*, September 3, 1900.

24. Captain Symons was described by Serena as "a large, portly man and very kind. Whenever the boat struck a snag or went aground on a sandbar, he would rush to the bar, take a dram, then sit on the deck and give orders and get exceedingly red. We never heard an oath while on the boat, and surely the Missouri was a very trying stream to navigate." Washburn Autobiography, 24-25. Regardless of the captain's opinion, it seems likely the boat was struck by lightning.



Such may have been the scene on the St. Louis waterfront (above) where the Washburn party departed for Montana Territory on May 26, 1869, aboard the *Submarine No. 14*. The third *Helena* (on the left with raised planks) was a side-wheel packet rebuilt and renamed in 1881.

pool. The rocking and creaking of the boat in its circling race, the roaring of the storm, the falling rigging, the engines blowing off steam, men hurrying and racing to obey the mate's orders, all made a deep impression on us. The idea was to get a man ashore with a cable before we were swept down the whirlpool and on to the bank. We came near enough to the shore, several deck hands leaped from the boat and carried the cable around a good-sized tree, but the momentum of the boat by this time was sufficient to act as a lever and pull the trees over. Everything seemed confusion, but the men made their way to another tree and by a desperate effort made the boat fast and we escaped with nothing more serious than a broken pilot wheel.²⁶

Our first Sabbath out the Captain asked my husband to have a game of chess, but he declined to play on the Sabbath. About the only thing to mark the day was the general housecleaning of the steward. Lelia has changed her dress and Nelse has shaved, and Nature,

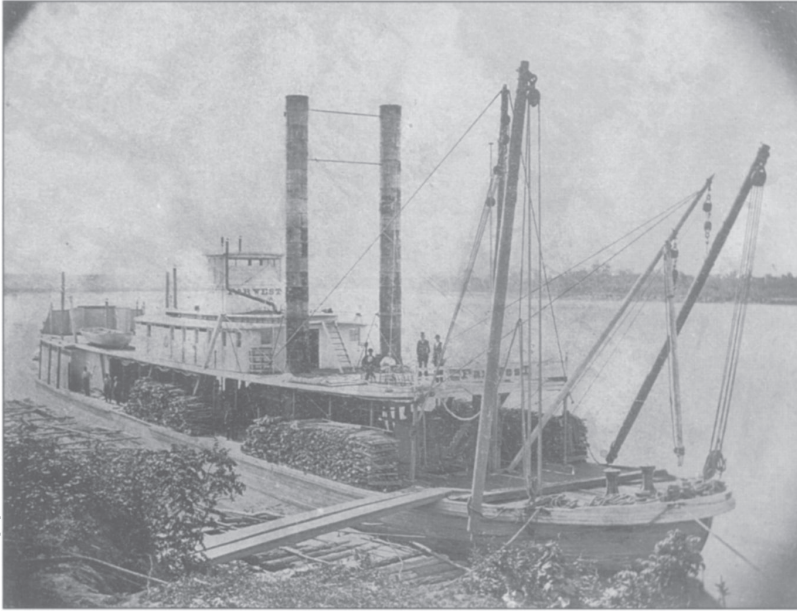
25. Arrow Rock, Missouri, is approximately 180 miles up the Missouri River from its mouth. Previous mentions of Fort Leavenworth and Omaha are serially out of place; the first being 492 miles from St. Louis and the second, 836 miles. Like White Cloud, Albany is no longer a riverside town. The Albany name now identifies the county seat of Gentry County, Missouri, and is 40 miles northeast of the Missouri River at the nearest point.

26. A paddle wheel. These were subject to damage from floating debris or channel obstructions but were easily repaired. Violent prairie winds were one of the dangers to which river boats were exposed. Lass, *History of Steamboating*, 4.

that has been so fitful and stormy, bathes everything today in bright sunshine, and refreshing breezes bear us on our way. At Sioux City the captain is changing freight.²⁷ We took a walk up on a high hill and had a fine view of the city and river. On the edge of the deep forest we could see the white-topped wagons of movers, camped for rest and to replenish their stores before pushing westward.²⁸ We attended Sabbath school and found them singing the popular song we first heard in Washington City and again [27] in St. Louis, *Hold the fort, for I am coming*. From this on, our journey is well punctuated with stops on sand-bars.²⁹ We broke our rudder twice the first day out, then broke our pilot wheel, stopped to mend it and hunt channel and chop some wood. How the chips flew! There were very few opportunities now to buy wood. Once we wooded where Indians had wintered. We used the poles for wood from which the ponies had gnawed the bark during the winter.³⁰

27. *Submarine No. 13* laid over two days at Sioux City, Iowa, 1,039 miles from St. Louis. T. C. Bailey described the town as having "about 3,000 inhabitants, is a very flourishing town, and is well situated on the east bank of the raging Missouri." On page twenty-four of her autobiography, Serena Washburn refers to the steamer they embarked on as the *Submarine No. 14*, but Bailey's two letters—written on board and published June 12 and 26, 1869—leave no doubt about the number; it was *No. 13*.

28. Probably emigrants. The term Serena used originated with the immigration into the old Northwest Territory after 1783.



Serena Washburn described more than once how the vessel she was on had to be “spurred” off sandbars after it had run aground. Illustrated on the *Far West* (left, circa 1880), the spars are the two upright poles with tackle near the tops, mounted on each side of the bow of the steamboat.

We wooded one day where only a few years before had been a happy home. While the parents were away for supplies, the Indians entered and killed all their five children. The grief-stricken mother soon joined her little ones and the father said he only lived to shoot the red man.³¹

We had time to visit Yankton.³² The weather was beautiful and everything was going smoothly when we struck a sandbar and were detained on it twenty-four hours. June 12, we left the sandbar with the aid of the spar and ‘monkey’ and passed Yankton Agency.³³ June 14th, the *War Eagle* boat passed us in the morning. Laid by on account of high wind. Walked to the top of

a high hill and had a beautiful view of the country, with not a living thing in view as far as the eye could reach.³⁴ The river is low and crooked and we cannot run of nights. At Pokahontas [*sic*] Island we heard rumors of the Indians being on the war path. Passed the ‘Crow’ settlement.³⁵ June 18 cold and windy. Passed old Fort George, wooded and stuck on a sandbar all night.³⁶ June 17. Past old Fort Sully and Fort Rice, the oldest forts on the river.³⁷ June 18. Passed Cheyenne Agency, quite a village of Indian [28] tepees, hand-painted, fine ponies, many dogs and children, and fifteen hundred Indians were here.³⁸ June 19. Laid by on account of rain and fog. Our boys went to hunt antelope. June 20. While on a sandbar all night, waiting for the river to rise, it fell six inches. Sent the yawl to hunt channel, then used the spar and was on our way once more. Fine herds of antelope in sight. June 21. Bright and clear. Took on

29. Steamboats operating on the Missouri River carried a pair of iron-shod spars slung one on each side near the bow. When stuck on a sandbar or grounded in shoal water, the spars were set in the river with the tops slanted forward or back, according to the way the boat was to be moved; then, tackle attached between the top of each spar to the corresponding gunwale was powered by the capstan to lift the boat so that it could be backed off the sandbar or pushed through shoal water. Rivermen called the process “sparring” or “grasshoppering.” Another method of moving a vessel, though more commonly used in ascending against the strong current of a rapid, was “warping,” where a line was taken ahead of the boat, to a tree on the bank or a “deadman” (a log buried crosswise) on the beach. The capstan, or steam winch, could then be used to pull the vessel forward. See Joseph M. Hanson, *The Conquest of the Missouri* (1910; reprint, New York, 1946), 86-87. See also Vestal, *The Missouri*, 45, and Lass, *History of Steamboating*, 12.

30. It has been estimated that a Missouri River steamboat consumed twenty-five cords of hardwood or thirty cords of cottonwood each twenty-four hours of steaming. Below Fort Randall, it was generally possible to purchase fuel from nomadic woodchoppers, called “wood-hawks,” who received eight dollars per cord for their efforts. Higher up the river, it was necessary to depend on “rack heaps” of driftwood cast up by the current, or those “deadenings” of standing, killed timber. When such sources of fuel failed, green cottonwood logs had to be used as a poor substitute. See Hanson, *Conquest of the Missouri*, 115-16.

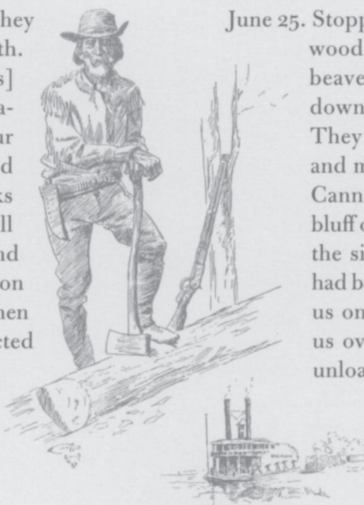
31. Serena is recounting an incident of the Sioux Wars that began with the killing of settler Robinson Jones and others by Santee Sioux near Acton, Minnesota, August 17, 1862, which spread to the northern plains in a series of disparate events, battles, and campaigns, and concluded with their surrender to General Nelson A. Miles on January 16, 1891, following the fight at Wounded Knee. However, the danger of Indian hostilities along the Missouri River waterway had been eliminated by the surrender of Chief Sitting Bull and his followers at Fort Buford ten years earlier. Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890* (Albuquerque, 1984), 187, 189. Other aspects of the Sioux Wars are considered on pages 76-81, 92-95, 102-5, 108-13, and 118-20.

32. The capital of Dakota Territory, 1,181 miles from St. Louis. C. T. Bailey notes that they arrived on June 9, “got shaved, bought some peanuts, and found that there is about 1,000 inhabitants in the town, which is better located than any town we have passed on the river.” *Terre Haute Saturday Evening Gazette*, June 26, 1869. Serena’s silence here, taken with her disparaging comment on the return trip (August 2), seems to imply that she was not pleased with Yankton, the last “town” short of Fort Benton.

wood. While we were doing so, the Indians came up to the rear of the house and drove away sixty-one head of horses. Seven white men started after the Indians and their horses. A herd of twenty-two beautiful antelope are in sight. June 22nd is a lovely morning, but we are fast on a bar. After trying for two days to get off, we took off half our load and went up the river and took off the rest of the load, then returned for what we had left behind.³⁹ Our boys killed an antelope. It was fine meat.

June 23. Two hours on a bar. Two boats pass us on the home trip. Pilot houses and windows all boarded up with heavy timbers.⁴⁰ They told us the Indians were on the war path. There were four-hundred warrior[s] seeking bloodshed. Immediately preparations were made to meet them. Our boat was loaded with sacks of shelled corn for the government. These sacks were brought up and a complete wall built around the deck. The women and children were told to stay in the saloon and get behind the trunks for safety. When we arrived at the place where we expected to find the Indians, there were none in sight. A white man who furnished cattle to boats said they were on the war path and had passed his place an hour before we arrived.

[29] June 24. Bought wood of the Indians. The squaws cut and cord the wood, the braves sell it. We usually have to stop about three hours a day now to cut wood. Cottonwood is the



The stereotypical wood-hawk, depicted by C. M. Russell above, could have resembled the ones Serena recounted supplying their steamboat with fuel.

only tree that grows in these valleys. We have to tie up every night on account of snags and bars. It seems rather slow traveling in these muddy waters. While they were chopping wood the other day, some of our party found a spring of clear crystal water and brought a pitcherful to the boat for us to enjoy, but we had become so accustomed to the flavor of the muddy water of the Missouri that the clear water tasted insipid. At Fort Rice we met Lieut. Hough, of Terre Haute, Indiana, who spent, the evening with us and was delighted to see some one from the civilized country.

June 25. Stopped twice in a beautiful country to cut wood. Took advantage of the work of the beavers. Some of the trees they had cut down were eighteen inches in diameter. They cut these trees into four foot lengths and made a dam across a part of the river. Cannonball River was interesting as one bluff on its bank was filled with stones about the size of cannonballs, looking as if they had been shot into the hill. The *Utah* passed us on her return trip.⁴¹ She kindly pulled us over a bar and saved us the trouble of unloading. June 28, met the *Lacon* of the same line of steamers. At Fort Buford, the passengers on the *Submarine* and part of the freight were transferred to the *Lacon*, as it was impossible for the large boat [*Submarine*] to get any further.⁴² The good-byes were said to our good friends on the boat and we started again on our journey to Helena.

33. A monkey was a small, deck-mounted steam engine used to power the capstan; also called a "steam nigger" or "nigger engine." J. Allen Hosmer, "A Trip to the States in 1865," in *Frontier Omnibus*, ed. John W. Hakola (Missoula, Mont., 1962), 310. Yankton Agency was located above the mouth of the Niobrara River. *Ibid.*, 312.

34. Unscheduled detainment of the vessel frequently allowed the passengers to go ashore, and T. C. Bailey recorded an amusing bit of repartee between Captain Symonds and several debarking ladies: "On one occasion the Captain cautioned them to walk on the same plank as the other men. 'We ain't men,' they replied. 'Well, well,' he said, 'I'm only granting you your rights. Your rights must be respected as much as any other man's.'" Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Gazette*, June 3, 1869.

35. Probably in the present Crow Creek Indian Reservation.

36. Twenty miles below present Pierre, South Dakota. Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1903), 2:502. See map, Vestal, *The Missouri*, 149; Hosmer, "A Trip to the States in 1865," 309.

37. Originally called Fort Bartlett when established by General Alfred Sully in 1863, this stockaded post on bottomland of the Missouri River's north shore four miles east of the present Pierre, South Dakota, was renamed Fort Sully the following year. The post was unhealthy and was abandoned in 1866 in favor of a new one, known by the same name, thirty miles to the north. Thereafter, the two sites were differentiated by adding "old" and "new" to the names. Herbert

M. Hart, *Old Forts of the Northwest* (Seattle, 1963), 55-57. See also Robert G. Athearn, *Fort of the Upper Missouri* (1967; reprint, Lincoln, 1972), 120-21. Fort Rice, 1,824 miles from St. Louis (named for Brigadier General James Clay Rice, killed in the battle of Laurel Hill, Virginia, on May 10, 1864), was established by General Alfred Sully on July 7, 1864, upon tableland on the west bank of the Missouri River eight miles above the mouth of the Cannonball. This ten-company post (protected by a palisade and blockhouses) was constructed by the Thirtieth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry to control an advantageous river crossing. It was abandoned November 25, 1878. Athearn, *Fort of the Upper Missouri*, 132-34. See also Hart, *Old Forts of the Northwest*, 58-60.

38. Established at the mouth of Cheyenne River, 1,283 miles from St. Louis, in 1868. Athearn, *Fort of the Upper Missouri*, 258. Serena is out of sequence here.

39. By landing half the cargo, the boat's draft was reduced so that it could pass over the shoal. If that had not been enough lightening, the whole cargo could have been moved above the shoal with small boats. Many steamboats carried several flat-bottomed "mackinaw" boats to facilitate such "double tripping." Lass, *History of Steamboating*, 13.

40. Most boats that operated above Sioux City after Indian hostilities spread from Minnesota to the Missouri River had pilot houses protected by planking or sheet iron.

41. The *Utah* reached Fort Benton on June 15, 1869. "Steamboat Arrivals," 322.

[30] July 4th. Cold, and everybody with their wraps on, shivering around a big fire in the cabin. We are in Montana Territory and talking of the Fourths we have enjoyed in the States. While taking wood, Mr. Allen brought us some ripe gooseberries, the only fruit we have found with the exception of the tart bullberry. July 5. Too warm to be comfortable. July 6. Cold and a storm raging and the boat tied up. Such a climate! I am afraid that the boat will blow to pieces. July 7, the boat *St. Johns* passed us and said to be on the lookout for Indians who had captured two men from the boat *Huntsville*. July 8. Came up with freight left by two boats. Two men were left to guard it in this lonely place. The boats are double tripping it to Fort Peck, ten miles away.⁴³ We learned more about the lost men. One, an old man going to his son's in Montana, went off with his gun and was never seen or heard of again. The boat waited three days to search for him. The other was a young man from Philadelphia, traveling for pleasure. He saw a fawn, tried to catch it. Just as he put his hand on it, a white man and two big Indians seized him, took off his clothing and arms. While they were quarreling over his money and gold watch and chain, he made his escape, more crazy than sane. He ran back to the river, plunged right in, climbed over the side of the boat, then ran right through the parlor where the ladies were.

July 9. No water, and had to unload freight and double-trip it. Run, or rather sparred, three miles against a stiff breeze, then had to lay by for half a day. Saw a large drove of buffalo. Our boys killed two. Cannot say the steaks are very delicious.⁴⁴ July 10. Going [31] back after the freight we left yesterday, we had to use the spars most of the way. What would we do without that "nigger."⁴⁵ July 11. Strong wind fastened us on a bar. Beavers thick in the water and even on the land they are not afraid of us. They are numerous here in the seventeen bends.⁴⁶ The river here bends just as fast as it can for seventeen times. The men brought a beaver on board for us to take a good look at him. July 13. The *Farragut* and our boat were together and both were stuck fast on a bar. Both boats unloaded. We had seven miles of bad river. We visited with the ladies on

the other boat and compared notes on a trip up the river in low water. While waiting, the boys went hunting. Thirza, Lelia, Aquila and I joined in the chase. Palmer Crabb and Mr. Allen hid in the brush and both men fired at once and only an expert huntsman knew who killed the buffalo. Mr. Allen knew that a buffalo cannot be killed except he is shot just behind the fore leg, to hit his heart. The fur and skin are so thick that even a large ball will glance off and not penetrate the hide.⁴⁷ One morning a herd of these grand old fellows were swimming the river. Our boat had to tie up for them. Some one shot one of the herd, but it only shook its head and swam on to the other shore. Nothing will stop or turn the course of a frightened herd of buffalo.

July 14. Another herd of buffalo crossed the river in front of our boat. We tried our hand at fishing while the boat stopped to cut wood. The finny tribe knew nothing of the trials of civilization and seized the hooks as fast as they were dropped in the water, only a few minutes being required to fill a wash-tub. There is a great var [32] iety of fish and we have them till we are tired of them. It was interesting to watch the Indians fishing. When the boat was some distance from them they looked like so many posts out in the river. When they catch fish they rend the air with their whoops and swing the unlucky fellow round and round their heads. We went out riding in the skiff at eight o'clock this evening. The days are very long here. The twilight lasts so long that we can read on deck at ten o'clock and day breaks about two o'clock in the morning. While looking at the beautiful country, we made great prophecies of what fifty years would do for this country. (I have seen more than my fancy painted come to pass in the thirty-five years I have lived since then). We are one hundred and seventy miles beyond Milk River.⁴⁸

July 15. What hallooing and rejoicing as we moved off the bar on which we had been sticking for thirty-six hours. Here we are fast again at one o'clock. Men are

42. Fort Buford was the military post opposite the mouth of the Yellowstone River. Construction began in June 1866 on a site selected by General Alfred Sully two years earlier, but the work was slowed by a lack of means and Indian harassment, so that the fort was yet unfinished in 1869. This post was abandoned in 1895. Athearn, *Forts of the Upper Missouri*, 227, 251-53; Hart, *Old Forts of the Northwest*, 61. Fort Union, an earlier fur trade post, was two miles up the Missouri River, on the same side (2,321 miles from St. Louis). The *Lacon* was a stern-wheel steamer, which had already been to Fort Benton that season (June 15). "Steamboat Arrivals," 317-25.

43. A trading post built by Abel Farwell in 1867 near the mouth of Milk River (2,597 miles from St. Louis) for the Indian trade of E. H. Durfee and Campbell K. Peck. The site is now under Fort Peck Reservoir. Roberta C. Cheney, *Names on the Face of Montana* (Missoula, Mont., 1971), 86.

44. Generally speaking, Serena's statement is not fair to the species. Well-butchered meat from a choice buffalo is very similar to beef and equally good.

45. A reference to the steam engine that powered the capstan.

46. The "seventeen bends" are now beneath the waters impounded by Fort Peck Dam.

47. Probably true of shots fired from some muzzle-loading guns. Indians often used less powder than a gun required for good penetration, and some hunters saved time when reloading by dispensing with the patch when seating the ball on the powder, depending instead on saliva to hold it in place, thus losing much of the power of their gun to blow-by of gases. The penetration of the surplus Civil War rifles furnished primarily for the defense of the Missouri River steamboats was quite adequate for such hunting, but the vitality of a buffalo bull did require a shot in a vital place or he could run off, perhaps to die beyond reach.

Serena recalled seeing herds of buffalo cross the river in front of her steamer.

Although fascinated by scenes similar to the one at right, taken from Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804–1806*, vol. 2, pt. 2 (New York, 1904), opp. p. 184, she did not appreciate the taste of their meat.



out in the yawl sounding for the channel. They return saying that in places there is only two feet three inches of water. The Captain is in a deep study. We remain here for three days on the east side of the river by tall cottonwood trees. It looks as though the Indians had wintered here. There are many poles from which the ponies have gnawed the bark and soft wood.⁴⁹ While looking through the woods, we discovered a number of bodies of departed Indians wrapped in red blankets or buffalo robes, and tied high up in the tallest trees, some as high as seventy feet. The wonder to me is how they ever get them there. We had already passed several burying grounds. They place four posts in the ground, ten feet high, [33] then cover with poles and place the body on them. There is always a taller pole standing at the head with a sack of provisions and medicine for the spirit to feed on during the six months it remains on probation, then it is permitted to enter the happy hunting grounds, where there are no palefaces. Their ponies and dogs are killed and buried under the scaffold, so they will be ready for their master's use.⁵⁰

A consultation is held over our situation. The Captain says we must return, for we cannot go any farther. We have been in Montana Territory for three weeks

and on the river eleven weeks, and we had expected to make the entire trip to Fort Benton in six weeks. From that point we had intended to go by ox-wagon three hundred miles over the mountains to Helena, where General Washburn was to take charge of the office of Surveyor General.⁵¹ We were only two hundred miles from Musselshell River where we had thought we might take an ox-train to our destination, but there is no possible way of getting there.⁵² Then only a few days before there had been a battle with the Indians there[,] who had been defeated with great loss and were so enraged that they were now on the warpath all over that part of the country, making travel very uncertain.⁵³ What is to become of us? We cannot fight, for we have nothing with which to fight. The government does not allow boats above Fort Berthold without taking on guns, and good ones too, but our Captain was careless and

48. At 170 miles beyond Milk River, the *Lacon* was approximately 25 miles from the mouth of Musselshell River (2,789 miles from St. Louis). However, they never managed to reach the Musselshell.

49. Horses can forage on cottonwood bark when necessary, as do elk when the snow is too deep for them to paw for grass. Osborne Russell, *Journal of a Trapper*, ed. Aubrey L. Haines (Portland, Oreg., 1955), 51, 81.

50. Such "scaffold burials" are typical of Siouan people.

51. The distance was 140 miles. Ferdinand V. Hayden, *Yellowstone National Park and the Mountain Regions of Portions of Idaho, Nevada, Colorado, and Utah* (Boston, 1876), 3.

52. While the position of the *Lacon* cannot be accurately determined, it seems likely that it was within a few miles of the mouth of the Musselshell River, where a young Danish storekeeper—Peter Koch—was gamely attempting to protect a stockade trading post on the right bank of the Missouri River. His "Fort Musselshell" was a remnant of the town site intended to serve the Montana Hide and Fur Company as a steamboat landing for a wagon road to Helena via the Judith Basin, but nearly constant Indian harassment turned that route into "a flat failure as it turned out." Joel Overholser, *Fort Benton: World's Innermost Port* (Helena, Mont., 1987), 175. Sarah Canfield noted the establishment of a summer encampment called "Camp Reeve" (for Colonel Isaac D. V. Reeve, of the Thirteenth United States Infantry), which was occupied by two companies during summer 1868. Mattison, "Diary of Sarah E. Canfield," 216, 218–19.

permitted the passengers to hunt and use the ammunition, and now there were not a dozen loads left.

Once more the *Farragut* came up with us and we tried to get pas [34] sage on her, but the Captain said, "No. We have one hundred and fifty passengers, many of them women and children, and our provisions are almost gone. We simply cannot take anyone." So we turn our faces homeward and try to sing *Homeward Bound*, but there is not much joy in the sound. The water is falling every minute and we are four hundred miles from Fort Buford, the nearest point where we can obtain provisions.⁵⁴

July 16. The *Huntsville* is trying to get up stream.⁵⁵ She had twenty-two young men from Philadelphia aboard, traveling for pleasure. We are aground again, unload and work hard all day and at night are just where we were in the morning. July 18. Afloat again, running the seventeen bends. We see a very large herd of buffalo and an immense American eagle and a drove of large elk. Mr. Allen killed a deer. We have had no meat for some time except as we killed it. For three weeks we have been dependent upon our huntsmen. July 19. Thirza and I counted the sacks of flour in the store room and the steward said there were just enough to last nine days, and very little dried fruit. What will we do! Our party had breakfasted and the second table were eating, when a loud crash was heard and an unusually great jar that knocked several from their seats. I was standing holding my state-room door and talking to Thirza who was sitting on my trunk. I was thrown almost to the floor, my sister was pitched headlong into my berth, but this did not seriously alarm us, as we were accustomed to hard knocks on bars and snags. But there was a rush and bustle outside and soon the cry reached us that the boat was sinking.⁵⁶ But we did not realize [35] our danger, even then, till my compan-

ion opened the door and said, "Come quickly, the boat is sinking." We rushed out on deck, the boat trembled like a leaf suddenly struck, then with a gurgle sank to the bottom of the river and turned partly on its side. Fortunately it had sunk in shallow water and the upper deck and our staterooms were dry. How much was done in the next five minutes, men flying in every direction from pilot house to cabin then down to the lower deck. Such gathering of trunks and haversacks and valuables. One man who could not swim threw his goods overboard and stood ready to jump. The great fear was that the boat would turn entirely over on her side, bringing destruction to everything.

But good fortune stood with us, for the water was only ten feet deep and the bed of the river comparatively level. So the boat did not turn over and we had no explosion. Thus far we were safe. The boat was loaded with sacks of shelled corn that had been shipped to Fort Benton for the horses of the United States soldiers. The deck hands would dive into the hull and throw them into the river in front of the hole in the boat to break the current and lighten the load so that we could see what would be the prospect of raising the boat. Captain Ticher, a very large man, [a] handsome Jack, and the mate plunged into the water to make a thorough examination of our damage, and see if it would be possible to raise the boat and mend the hull.⁵⁷ A snag, a part of a tree, had broken entirely through the hull, making a hole nine feet in length by three feet wide. This great hole was the cause of the boat going down so quickly.[36] There was no way out of it, our boat must be mended. We were six hundred miles from Fort Benton up the river,

53. The fight Serena refers to was probably an attack by one hundred Sioux who were repulsed "by several [*sic*] shots from a mountain howitzer." Overholser, *Fort Benton*, 176. There was an earlier fight between Sioux Indians and a detachment of the Thirteenth Infantry out of Camp Cooke on "Musselshell River," April 7, 1869. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, 2:433.

54. Since the mouth of Musselshell River is listed as 464 miles above the mouth of the Yellowstone (Fort Buford), it appears they turned around only 64 miles below that occupied place.

55. The *Huntsville* made its first arrival at Fort Benton on June 11, and was back again on June 19 (double-tripping). "Steamboat Arrivals," 322-23. See also Charles Larpentur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, ed. Elliott Coues, 2 vols. (New York, 1899), 2:446. Evidently the *Huntsville* did not manage a third landing at Fort Benton (the last landing there in 1869 was on July 2).

56. The hull had been punctured by a snag or sawyer. As William Fairholme noted in 1840, the Missouri River had its share of both: "The former are large trunks of trees which float down the stream till they become fixt [*sic*] in some shallow, and one end remains protruding some distance out of the water, usually very sharp & jagged at the point. The sawyer is even more dangerous, for instead of being

stationary like the snag, the upper end is moved up and down in the current about 7 or 8 inches below the surface, & is thus invisible except by the swirl of water round it." Jack B. Tykal, ed., *Journal of an Expedition to the Grand Prairies of the Missouri, 1840* (Spokane, Wash., 1996), 47. See also Vestal, *The Missouri*, 20-21.

57. Jack is probably used in the sense of a man or sailor, not a personal name as capitalization hints.

58. Serena is badly confused as to the distance to Fort Benton or Fort Peck. Assuming, as previously, that their upstream progress was 400 miles above Fort Buford, then their crippled boat was something less than 146 miles above Fort Peck, or more than 387 miles below Fort Benton. It is interesting that she makes no mention of two other points of possible succor: Camp Cooke and Cow Island, respectively, 98 and 154 miles below Fort Benton. The steamer *Tempest*, Captain James L. Bissell, went aground at Cow Island in late spring and was there nearly all summer of 1869 with its crew and the workmen brought down from Fort Benton by Captain Grant Marsh who rescued the vessel. Hanson, *Conquest of the Missouri*, 123-24. Camp Cooke was garrisoned by four hundred men of the Thirteenth Infantry at the time.

59. Closer to 2,712 miles; Fort Benton was 3,112 miles from St. Louis by the sinuous Missouri River.



From Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (New York, 1904), opp. p. 8

Still almost four hundred miles below Fort Benton, the Washburn's second steamboat of their Missouri voyage, the *Lacon*, hit a snag and sank in shallow water. The hazard posed by fallen trees that became fixed in the riverbed was exacerbated by low water levels late in the season. Graphically depicted in the drawing above, it was but one of the dangers inherent to river travel to Montana Territory.

and two hundred miles from Fort Peck down the stream and the latter place was only a deserted fort where hunters make a stopping place.⁵⁸ Our provisions are almost gone, and here we are in the wilderness with savage Indians all about us. Our Knabe piano and household goods are all in the water. The previous winter a great deal of complaint had been made about the great waste of money in providing for the red men, and Congress had cut down their supplies and this had greatly an-

gered the Indians and sent so many of them on the warpath in the summer of 1869. We were twenty-six hundred miles from St. Louis.⁵⁹ The crookedness of the stream gives it this distance. We often see great stalwart Indians take their new red blankets and tear them into strips three inches wide, tie one end to their belts, then run and look back at the flying strips with great satisfaction. They often braid the tails of wild animals in their hair and paint to look grotesque.

How Serena Washburn and the other passengers of the *Lacon* managed to extract their sunken boat from the Missouri River mud and continue their journey is detailed in the second part of this article, to appear in the Spring 2000 issue of *Montana*. *M*



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