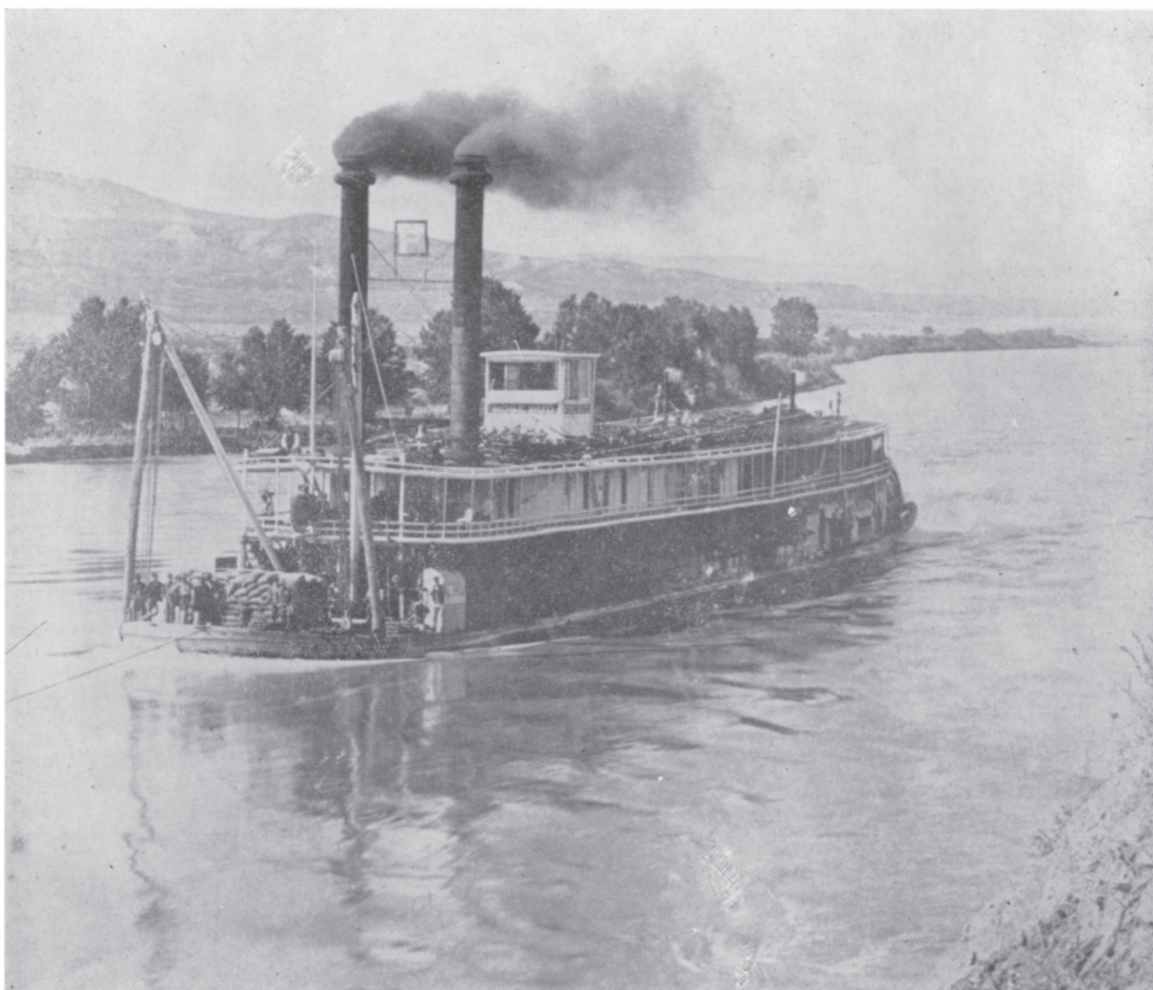


# Slow Boat To Benton



by Dorothy M. Johnson

**I**N FEBRUARY, 1866, Wilbur Fisk Sanders and his wife and their two little boys, James and Wilbur, left their home in Virginia City, Montana Territory, to visit relatives back in the states. Friends gave them an appropriate *bon voyage* present, according to a journal that Mrs. Sanders kept: a beautiful gold nugget “weighing \$205.”

They traveled by sleigh and coach, sleeping on the floor in blankets and fur robes. They left home February 21, and March 9 had been on the coach night and day for 16 days except for a brief stop in Salt Lake City, where

Brigham Young and his 31 wives were among the sights Mrs. Sanders noted. She was happily surprised at how well her little boys were behaving. She noted March 7, “Strange as it may seem we are having a most comfortable journey . . . I cannot but wonder if we shall ever see a r.r. so far west as M.T.”—meaning, of course, a railroad to Montana Territory.

At Atchison, March 14, they took a train and reached their destination—her journal doesn’t say what it was—March 17, 1866.

# The Diary of Mrs. Wilbur Fisk Sanders, Written 93 Years Ago, Reveals Tedium and Concern For Her Family on a Long Journey Home

But returning to Montana, slightly more than a year later, was a different matter. This time Mrs. Sanders' mother was along, also a youth called Eddie, who undoubtedly was her nephew, James Edward Upson, son of James and Clarinda Fenn Upson. Mrs. Upson was Mrs. Sanders' sister. Probably because Mrs. Sanders' mother, Mrs. Fenn, was in the party, they went home the easy way, by Missouri River steamboat—and how appallingly slow and tedious it was!

Mrs. Sanders kept a written record of this journey, too. She called it "Journal of a Trip from Ohio to Montana Ty. in the summer of 1867 via Chicago, St. Joe and the Missouri River, on board Steamer *Abeona*, Ft. Benton and Helena to Virginia City, by Mrs. H. P. Sanders of Montana." The H. P. stands for her given names, Harriet Peck.

The Sanders party boarded the *Abeona* at St. Joe, Missouri, April 24. The next day, Mrs. Sanders noted, was her birthday; she was 33. This day comes a hint of the exasperation of river travel with which she became better acquainted later on: the *Abeona* was in sight of the *Amaranth*, which had left St. Louis two weeks ahead of her!

Next day they passed the *Amaranth*. The river current was so strong that "the men are obliged to warp to move the boat that is tie the rope to trees and pull." When they reached Nebraska City, Mr. Sanders (she never calls him Wilbur) and Eddie went up town. No fear that the boat would go off and leave them—no, indeed. This is what river travel was like:

Sun. 28th. On a sand bar for nearly an hour this A.M. The wind rose before noon and we were obliged to tie up all day.

Mon. 29th. Another wind storm today. It is impossible for the boat to move. Are tied up all day.

Next day they reached Omaha, went up town and did some shopping. Mr. Sanders bought a box of apples and some lemons for the family and parted from them to go back to St. Joe and "Winthrope" by rail and thence to Montana the fast way, by coach.

May 1, the *Abeona* was 65 miles beyond Omaha. But next day the paddle wheel was broken and the boat waited for repairs. May 3 they were off and away. The *Abeona* passed the *Antelope* and the *Amaranth*, running side by side with the latter for some time and nearly getting hit. Steamboats, when they could move at all, often raced—and never mind how the lady passengers felt about the danger.

May 4 the *Abeona* started at daylight but at 8 A. M. tied up for the day. A tree struck the guard rail and broke it away and went through the cook's

This is the first in a series of three amusing sketches written by Montana's able Dorothy Johnson, based on the journals of James U. Sanders, son of Colonel and Mrs. Wilbur Fisk Sanders. This episode is from a diary kept by Mrs. Sanders during the tedious 1867 trip home to Virginia City, M. T., after a year's visit in Ohio and other eastern states. It was copied nine years later by James and is included in his historic manuscript book, now owned by W. H. Bertsche, Jr. of Great Falls.

In subsequent issues we will publish an intimate account of James' life as a Helena teenager in 1875; and a memorable trip with his father to Philadelphia in 1876 to attend the nation's Centennial observance and the Republican National Convention in Cincinnati.

James Upson Sanders, who died in 1923 after an automobile accident, carried on the illustrious tradition of his family. A respected attorney, he became librarian for the Historical Society of Montana and also served for many years as secretary of the Society of Montana Pioneers. We are grateful to Mr. Bertsche for making the original manuscript available to the lucid pen of Miss Johnson, who needs no introduction to our readers.



BENTON II, steamer of the T. C. Power "Block P" line, is tied up at the Fort Benton levee at about the same spot where Thomas Francis Meagher, acting governor of Montana, mysteriously drowned in 1867. Mrs. W. F. Sanders and her family were making their way up the river by slow steamer when word came of the tragedy, and Mrs. Sanders took note of the event in her diary. (Historical Society of Montana photo)

room. The passengers got off for a nice walk, and the *Antelope* passed the *Abeona*.

But the day after, they passed the *Antelope*, tied up in the morning on account of wind, and were passed by the *Gallatin*. Mrs. Sanders noted that they had been five days going 100 miles.

In Sioux City, on the 7th, she bought and trimmed a hat for herself, and Eddie lost his. May 8, the *Abeona* was on a sandbar all day and the *Ida Stockdale* passed it. On the 10th, during a stop in Yankton, Eddie bought a hat. At Bonhomme Island they saw the *Big Horn* laid up with a burst steam pipe and the *Benton*, *Gallatin* and *Ida Stockdale* all aground.

So the *Abeona* went cautiously on the other side of the island, where the water was six inches deeper, but it took all one day for the men to pull the boat three times its own length over sandbars. The *Abeona* got into four feet of water—and then ran out of wood for the boiler, so the men went ashore to get some.

Missouri River steamboats lived off the country as to fuel. The average

boat burned about 30 cords of cottonwood in 24 hours of steaming. Below Fort Randall there were wood yards; above that, they were scarce, and the hardy men who dared cut firewood for sale to hungry steamboats could get \$8 a cord for it—if they lived. In 1868 alone, seven of these wood hawks were killed by Indians between Fort Benton and the downriver settlements.

May 13, "We passed the Yankton Agency at ten this A. M. and Fort Randall at five P. M. Mailed a despatch to Mr. Sanders. Any number of Indians all along the bank today and Indian graves in the air." Next day the boat tied up all day because of wind but made ten miles in early morning and late evening.

On the 15th, Mrs. Sanders mentions, not for the first time, that "we are making very poor time" and comments wistfully that "Mr. Sanders is in Virginia City tonight I think." (He wasn't. He got there May 31.)

Then, day after day, it's sandbars and delay. On the 20th, the *Abeona* broke one rudder and the wheel and lost another rudder, tied up all day for a new rudder to be made, and "Eddie got into the river."

On the 22d, four weeks after leaving St. Joe, they passed old Fort Sully and saw some elk. Next day one of the boilers burnt through and the boat tied up again. Everybody went ashore. the men to hunt antelope. Mrs. Sanders and five other passengers "took a boat ride." This is, of course, what they had been doing for the past month.

Next day the *Antelope* passed them and the boiler wasn't mended yet. The *Benton* passed them. The *Abeona* passengers all went out on the hills. On the 25th, the men killed three large rattlesnakes, four more steamers passed, and the *Abeona's* delay was getting maddening, because the river was high, and high water was a requirement for reaching Fort Benton. On the 26th they made 25 miles, passing new Fort Sully. The day after, they passed two of the boats that had passed them. Mrs. Sanders had a toothache and a fever. She noted this without complaint.

Harriet Peck Fenn Sanders was not a complaining woman. Her journal never expresses concern about danger from Indians or damage to the steamboat. Those were problems for the menfolks. Harriet's business was to look after her family.

May 28, "Alarm of Indians, they have attacked two boats, and killed one man. Our men shot a beaver." With four other steamers, the *Abeona* was tied up and the men couldn't find the channel. Furthermore, the river was falling. But they had passed the Little Cheyenne River.

On the 29th, Mrs. Sanders unpacked the "fruit trunk" to keep her boys happy. The *Abeona* passed three other boats and tied up by the Moreau River. Next day they made fifty miles and passed the *Trover* and the *Big Horn*, but these boats passed them the day after because the *Abeona* had to stop while the men brought wood from a mile away.

June 1 they stopped an hour for fog, two hours for wood. The *Trover* passed them after a long race and caught fire

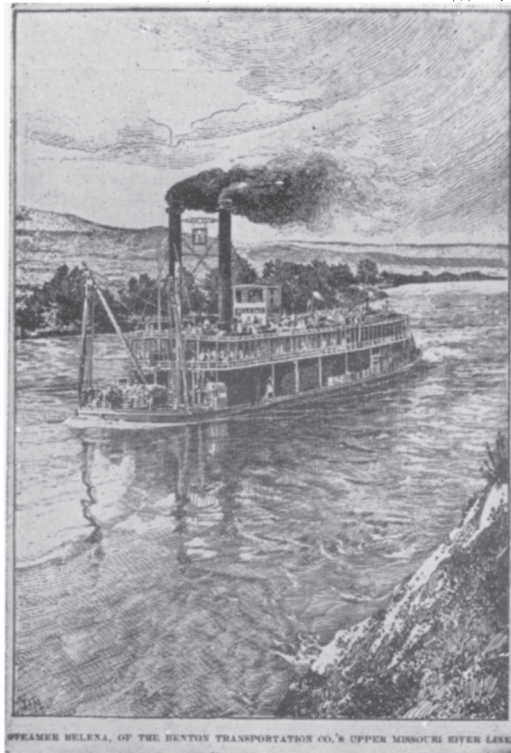
back of the pilot house. Willie was quite sick, his mother noted.

June 2 they stopped at Fort Rice, which had been attacked by Indians three weeks before. "Mr. English read service this evening," it being Sunday, but not many passengers attended. (When Mrs. Sanders was in a proper town, she went to church twice on Sunday and to prayer meeting during the week.)

Next day, a deck hand named Johnston fell overboard while chopping wood. Mr. English saw him go. Some of the men went out in a small boat to search for Johnston, but they never found him. "Poor fellow," wrote Mrs. Sanders.

June 4, they stopped briefly for wood but made 65 miles. It was hot—109 in the sun.

Next day they stopped at Fort Berthold, and Mrs. Sanders noted "a call from Messrs. Tutt, Russell, McCormick, Gov. Smith, Col. McLane, Judge Davis," who were traveling on the *Octavia*. (Green Clay Smith had been appointed territorial governor of Montana by President Johnson in 1866.



STEAMER HELENA, OF THE BENTON TRANSPORTATION CO.'S UPPER MISSOURI RIVER LINE



JAMES U. SANDERS, who became Historical Society of Montana librarian, transcribed his mother's 1867 diary into a manuscript book now owned by W. H. Bertsche of Great Falls from which Miss Johnson has extracted this and two other events from the lives of the Sanders family.



WILBUR E. SANDERS, always called "Willie" by his family, was one of two small sons whom Mrs. Sanders had to keep happy and occupied on the long steamer trip to Fort Benton. Willie was two years younger than his brother, James. Another son, Louis, had not yet been born at the time of the 1867 adventure.  
(Historical Society of Montana photos.)

His predecessor, Montana's first governor, was Sidney Edgerton, an uncle of Mrs. Sanders' husband.)

June 6 the *Abeona* passed the Little Missouri River in an all-day rain. Wind delayed them the following day, but they met two boats coming downriver and had the welcome news that there was plenty of water upstream.

For several days they kept meeting boats coming downriver. The upper Missouri River was no lonely road! It was a superhighway, and the traffic on it was tremendous by 1867. (A pageant-drama by Prof. Bert Hansen of Montana State University on July 2, 3, and 4, 1960, at Fort Benton, celebrated the centennial of the arrival of the very first steamboat at Fort Benton on July 2, 1860.) Mrs. Sanders was traveling in the biggest year of steamboating up to Benton. There were times that year when thirty or forty steamboats were on the river between Fort Benton and the mouth of the Yellowstone.

There was always something to look at, although it wasn't necessarily what the passengers really wanted to see.

Mrs. Sanders noted wolves, Indians, buffalo and antelope, but she didn't get enthusiastic about the scenery until the *Abeona* was nearing Fort Benton and she felt that the tedious journey might actually come to an end.

June 10, the *Abeona* tied up to the bank, which fell in and broke the fantail and 20 feet of guard rail. Next day the men shot two deer in the river but they sank before a small boat could reach them. Passengers sat out on the deck in the evening and listened to two men singing. Eddie "with others" shot a buffalo on the bank, and somebody went out in a small boat and brought it in.

June 13, they reached Fort Buford and mailed some letters, passed the mouth of the Yellowstone river, hit the bank and broke the fantail again (it took three hours to repair), and there were plenty of Indians around. They passed Fort Union at six P. M.

Next day the *Abeona* raced with the *Trover*, hit three times and broke two posts. "Mother, Mrs. Isaacs, Mrs.



JAMES EDWARD UPSON, son of Mrs. Sanders' sister, was undoubtedly the boy "Eddie" mentioned in her diary. Eddie was 14 years old when this picture was taken in Virginia City on May 16, 1868. He was the son of James and Clarinda Fenn Upson.  
(Historical Society of Montana photo.)



MRS. WILBUR FISK SANDERS, the former Harriet Peck Fenn, had the usual worries of a 33-year-old mother on a long trip with young children when she wrote her diary in 1867. This portrait was taken in Washington, D. C., after her husband had become U. S. Senator from Montana.  
(Historical Society photo.)

Houghton, Miss Hopkins went over onto *Trover* had a pleasant call." Travel was slow, but social life was brisk.

The *Abeona* met the *Amelia Poe*, with Mr. Isaacs on board, on June 15. He said he had left Mr. Sanders at Fort Benton. Passengers went visiting on the *Mountaineer* (which carried eight buffalo calves along with passengers and freight), and Mrs. Sanders had a letter from her husband. He was coming downriver and would meet her the following day.

On the 16th, sure enough, Mr. Sanders arrived on the *Yorktown*, bringing "a nice roast," which Mrs. Sanders does not say anything more about. There is no mention in her journal of the food served on the *Abeona*. Presumably there was plenty of meat, with all that game the men kept knocking off.

Next day they saw two "large drove of buffalo," the Sanders and Isaacs couples went ashore to see some trees cut down by beaver, and the scenery was fine. The *Abeona* passed Milk River at 11 A. M. the following day, taking two hours to find a channel.

The *Abeona* and the *Trover* had a long race; the *Trover* was hit twice and got its guard rail broken. Three ladies from the *Trover* came over to call.

On the 19th, the *Abeona* stuck on a sandbar and had to wait until the current washed it away. But "all hands had a good song out on ground in the evening."

Next day the boiler burnt through and the river was falling two inches every 15 minutes. But the *Abeona* started again and passed the *Trover*, high and dry. While her engine was being mended, the river had fallen so fast that she was stranded.

This same day, Mrs. Sanders makes a most remarkable statement:

"Mike caught a swordfish of twenty five pounds. Mr. Sanders shot it and Mike jumped in and caught it. Its mouth is as large as Jimmie's head."

Harriet Sanders was a serious reporter of serious events. She did not go off in flights of fancy. But what was a swordfish doing in the Missouri River? The Montana Department of Fish and Game solved this mystery; it



ARTIST KARL BODMER portrayed the steamer "Yellowstone" making its torturous way up the Yellowstone near Fort Union in 1833. (Historical Society of Montana collection)

was probably a paddle fish, also known as a spoonbill cat. They're still to be found in Fort Peck Reservoir and downstream in the Missouri, but nobody cares very much.

June 24 the boat stopped for thirteen hours to "wood up." It stuck on a sandbar all the next day, and now comes the first sign of complaint from Harriet Sanders:

"All got the blues. Have thrown off every stick of wood that the men cut yesterday from six A. M. to seven P. M."

So the day after that they had to stop, after going a few miles, to wood up and mend the boiler again. On the 27th they wooded all day about Harriet Island. "All the men helped to draw in twenty loads, have all the boat will carry."

They reached Cow Island next day, and it was a warm one—114 in the shade.

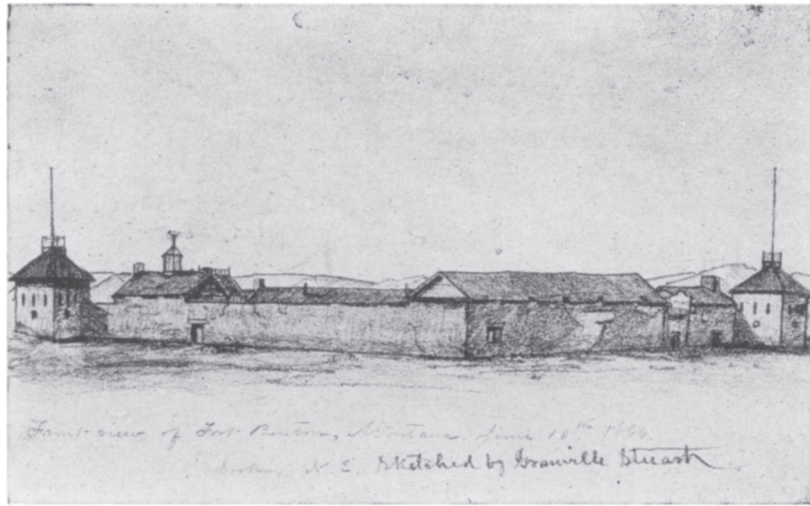
On June 30 there was excitement. The men shot at three buffalo swimming in the river and got two of them. The third escaped onto the bank and took after the men on shore. The hunters prudently scattered. "One dropped his gun and climbed a tree in about no time," wrote Mrs. Sanders with a smile. "He was nearly frightened to death."

Now, close enough to Fort Benton to feel that she was really going to get there while she was still thirty-three, she comments on the scenery: "Beautiful scenery, castles, etc. along the river." But there was also trouble:

"Reached Bird's Rapids at seven P.M. Tried to rope up. Mr. Sanders and four others were left on opposite shore. Our boat dashed against the perpendicular wall of rocks on the bank and broke it some and the 'nigger.' I did not go to bed till half past two in the morning, when we got over the rapids and sent a small boat across for the men. They built a large fire last night on the shore." She says not a word about being worried, but why else did she stay up until half past two?

Next day the *Abeona* stopped again to wood up. A deserter from Camp Cook, fifty miles upriver, arrived in a small boat and came aboard. The steamer reached Camp Cook the following day. Mrs. Sanders doesn't say whether the deserter was greeted with joy or by a firing squad. Here the boat unloaded eighty tons of freight, and Col. Sanders walked three miles to another boat, the *Gallatin*, so as to reach Fort Benton ahead of his family and engage coach passage for them.

FORT BENTON in 1866 was sketched by Granville Stuart. This was the era of greatest activity at Fort Benton, head of navigation of the Missouri River, when from 30 to 40 steamboats at a time plied the waters between here and the mouth of the Yellowstone. (Historical Society of Montana collection)



The Missouri made trouble on July 1; the crew worked for three hours roping the *Abeona* up Drowned Man's Rapids. Wood was scarce; the men had to carry it half a mile. The hungry boilers used up all the fuel in making thirty miles, but at least the *Abeona* had got past the rapids. They left the *Tacony* behind, still in trouble there.

On July 2 the *Abeona* stopped all day to wood up; this time wood was a whole mile away. Some of the steamer hands deserted, starting for Benton on foot with a few crackers in their pockets for provisions.

Traffic was congested. The *Tacony* and the *Agnes* came up. The *Gallatin* and the *G. A. Thompson* came down. July 3, the *Tacony* passed the *Abeona*, and the *Amaranth* came downriver. The *Abeona* stopped at a coal yard and took on 150 bushels of coal.

"We are sixty miles from Benton," wrote Mrs. Sanders, adding, "Heard that Gen'l. T. F. Meagher was drowned at Benton day before yesterday." About this drowning she did not comment, "Poor fellow."

Harriet's husband was an active politician of Republican convictions. Four times he was a candidate for territorial delegate in Congress; he was a member of the territorial legislature from 1872 to 1880; he was one of the brand-new state's first two U. S. Senators in 1890.

Thomas Francis Meagher was a high-ranking soldier of fortune, a Democrat, usually embroiled in controversy. He

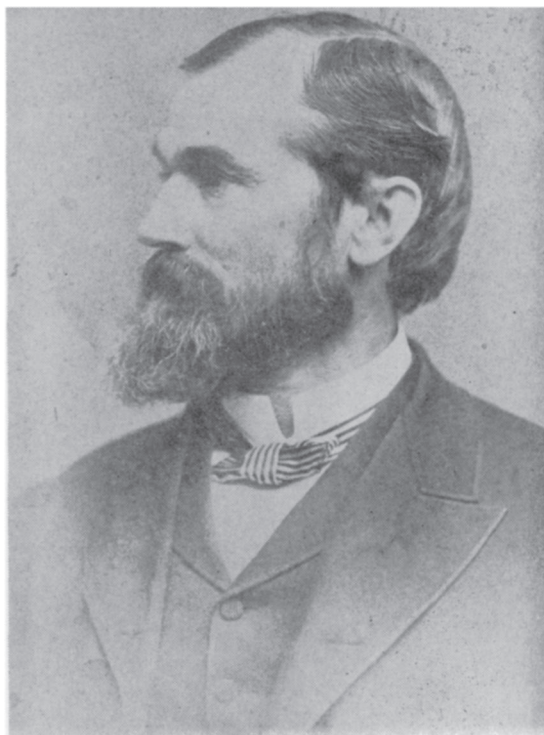
became territorial secretary of Montana in 1865 and was acting governor when Sidney Edgerton was out of the state, which was most of the time. In 1867, the year of Harriet Sanders' long boat ride, Congress canceled all the acts of the second and third legislative sessions of Montana Territory, and Meagher was disgraced. He did indeed drown at Fort Benton, and to this day nobody knows for sure whether he fell or was pushed.

Years later, Wilbur Fisk Sanders tried to clear the record of this scandal. He said that General Meagher went crazy. The two men were together all that last afternoon of Meagher's life. Meagher refused to take a single drink, Sanders pointed out—for there were those who said he had fallen into the river while drunk. But Meagher was strangely suspicious of people that day, repeating that the citizens of Fort Benton were out to get him. After he was put to bed in his stateroom on the steamer (cold sober, according to Sanders), he was heard calling for a pistol. Nobody ever admitted seeing him again, nor was his body ever found.

Sanders has a Montana county named for him; so has Meagher. Both men have been immortalized in bronze at the state capitol in Helena. An equestrian statue of General Meagher, the dashing soldier of fortune, is in front of the building. Inside the capitol is the bronze figure of Colonel Sanders, the



THOMAS FRANCIS MEAGHER, the strange Irish adventurer who became Montana's acting governor when Sidney Edgerton was out of the state, was drowned at Fort Benton in July, 1867. Col. Sanders (right) tried to clear up the mystery of Meagher's death. Statues of both these men are at Montana's capital, and both have had Montana counties named for them.



WILBUR FISK SANDERS, Vigilante, lawyer, legislator, businessman, and politician, was photographed in New York, after he had achieved national prominence. One of the stalwarts among Montana pioneers, some intimate details of his family life are revealed in the diary kept by his wife and the youthful journals of his son, James U. Sanders. (Historical Society photos.)

hero of Vigilante days, with the inscription, "Men, do your duty." (Good advice indeed for the legislators who convene there every second year.)

Sanders had been the Vigilantes' voluntary prosecuting attorney. "Men, do your duty," was his command to the executioners of George Ives, the first road agent the Vigilantes hanged. The men did their duty, and George Ives dangled in the moonlight at Nevada City, M. T.

Now back to Mrs. Sanders in the relatively peaceful year of 1867, not quite four years after that hanging:

July 4—ah, happy day!—the *Abeona* passed the mouth of the Marias River at one P. M. and made the other 27 miles to Benton by eleven that night. Here, in the journal as copied by Mrs. Sanders' son James nine years later, he has inserted: "Everybody drunk and celebrating in the full sense of the word. Papa delivered the oration during the day."

But Mrs. Sanders ignored the revelry. The family wasted no time in riotous Fort Benton. At 11 P. M. they landed; at 2 A. M. they were off and away by coach for Helena. The *Abeona* had been seventy-two days coming from St. Joe, eighty days from St. Louis.

All day July 5 they rode in the coach, which was crowded, "and we are all tired," wrote Mrs. Sanders in Spartan understatement. All night they rode, too, reaching Helena at eight in the morning. They stopped at Mrs. Rumley's; "she is a fine woman and made it very pleasant for us all." Right away they had callers: two judges, a minister, their wives and some other people. The Sanders family was important, and important people called on them—never mind if what they really needed was a good rest. Furthermore, that night they were serenaded—a pleasant custom, unless one wants to go to bed early.

Next day was Sunday, so they all went to church. Then Col. and Mrs.



SANDERS HOME in Virginia City, to which Mrs. Sanders was so anxious to return after her tedious journey from the "States" in 1867, is pictured here in 1899 when it was occupied by the family of A. W. Hall. Below is pictured Virginia City's main street at the height of its activity. (Historical Society of Montana photos.)

Sanders went calling. No good long sleep that night, either. At 2 A. M. they started for home, Virginia City, 120 miles away, arriving at 11 P. M. after 21 hours on wheels.

"Stopped at Dr. Gibson's, all well and glad to see us. End of our trip. 'Home again, from a Foreign State'."

Sunday, July 14, Mrs. Sanders made a final entry in her journal: "Slept in our new house last night for the first time. It is on Idaho Street."

So after all that travel, when she finally did get home to Virginia City, the poor woman had to go through the misery of a moving job.

