

THE OSAGE RIVER

As one who has travelled by steamboat on almost every one of our navigable rivers, let me say that the stretch of the Osage river from Bagnell to the mouth of the Niangua river, a stretch of 38 miles before the Bagnell dam was built, was by far the most picturesque, the most scenic and most colorful that Steamboat Bill ever cast his eyes upon. And that the Niangua river was at one time, perhaps the greatest bass stream in Missouri. An immense amount of freight came up and down the Osage including many fine walnut logs and ties, up into the millions.

Captain James Dodd who owned Dodd's Island, one of the largest in the Missouri river, was the most noted boatman and operator on this river before the Civil War. Captain Dodd owned the *Maid of Osage* and a number of other steamboats. Dodd's Island lays right below the mouth of the Osage and in olden times this river poured a crystal stream square out into the river; later it went into the Missouri and went down what was known as Osage Chute to empty into the Missouri at Bonnet's Mill.

Captain Dodd had three sons, Tom, Hal and Sterling, all steamboat captains. Captain Hal was the most colorful character we ever had on the Missouri. At times he held an interest in the steamers *Umpire*, *Belfast*, *Last Chance* and *Far West*.

Above the mouth of the Osage was known as Osage Point. At one time this was the largest shipping point on the whole river from St. Louis to Fort Benton. Here the large Missouri river boats would transfer their cargoes to the smaller, lighter draught Osage river boats. Large warehouses were here 'though there is no sign or trace of them anymore.

In the Spring when our rivers were high, some of the large Missouri river boats would go from St. Louis clean to Warsaw, 172 miles from the mouth of the Osage river. We know the *Last Chance* took 6,000 barrels of salt from St. Louis scattering them along the Osage as far up as Warsaw. The big side-wheeler *New Lucy* also went up to the head of navigation on this river and she was a big steamboat on any man's river.

Past the mouth of the Osage and down through Osage Chute was a very dangerous piece of river always dreaded by river pilots. The steamer *Jefferson*, first boat to sink in this river, lies buried in this chute. The large sidewheel boat *Kate Howard* lies in this place, too. On top of her lies the steamer *Excell*. Some two or three other boats lie nearby.

The man that knew the Osage river above all others was Captain William Towns who was both a noted pilot and a noted rifle shot. The writer saw Captain Towns use a rifle when seventy years of age. It was uncanny to see what he could do with an old time or a modern rifle. Captain Towns never piloted a boat on any other stream than the Osage and it was pitiful to see and hear him lament when the old steamboats quit this river.

Lamentations and sorrow dwelt among our old

boatmen as the boat disappeared from our rivers. As the iron horse took over, boatmen could not understand the change. Captain Bill Lingo once said to me: "Sonny, I have spent enough money in a saloon in the town of Omaha in one night to buy every foot of ground Omaha now stands on, and here I am on a rotten old boat, working for a pittance and glad to get it."

As late as 1885 the *Helena*, *General Meade* and *Benton* would go up to Rocheport, deliver their cargoes and on the way back to St. Louis go up to Linn Creek, 110 miles up the Osage, and then back to St. Louis. The historical steamer *Far West* ended up her days in this trade. These boats had to battle competition from the smaller boats running in connection with the Missouri Pacific railroad.

George Kraemer, a retired station agent, now living at Hermann, Mo., knew all these boatmen. He was the station agent at Osage City for years and can tell about the enormous amount of tonnage handled by these boats.

Captains Henry Castrup and Bob Marshall owned the steamers *Frederick* and *John R. Hugo*. They also used the big barge *Jumbo* in connection with these boats. Captain William D. Earp, now living in Hermann, Mo., started his long career on our rivers on the steamer *Frederick*. Captain Bob Marshall, still living at Tuscumbia, Mo., is the dean of Osage river boatmen. He is almost 91 years old and as fine a little Scotchman as you ever met.

Captain Havenstein and others ran the *John R. Wells* in this trade. At times they made successful and profitable trips direct from Linn Creek to St.

Louis. This was the last boat in the St. Louis-Linn Creek trade.

The last boat built on the Osage and the last boat to run on that stream was the sternwheeler *Homer C. Wright*.

Captain Henry Castrup was quite a river scribe and newspaper man. His Osage river stories in the Jefferson City Post Tribune, a short time before he died, are Osage river classics.

“Our clear rivers flow
And our steamboats blow,
The river characters come
And roustabouts go
But we still have snow—
So let her blow, Buddie,
For thar she goes!”