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STEAMBOAT ARABIA

by Sonie Liebler

(Sonie Liebler, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is a historian associated with Kaw River Research. She worked on the Arabia project.)

THE 1850s are considered the Golden Age of the Santa Fe Trail and the Golden Age of the Missouri River steamboat trade. During this decade freight tonnage carried by the caravans to Santa Fe reached its highest level to date, as did the number of steamboats plying the lower Missouri River from St. Louis to Port of Kansas (Kansas City). The steam packet *Arabia* ran this stretch in 1855 and 1856 until it hit a snag and sank in Quindaro Bend, one and one-half miles below Parkville, MO. Excavated in 1988-1989, the side-wheeler's cargo and machinery can be seen in the Treasures of the Steamboat *Arabia* Museum, Kansas City, MO.

Although the *Western Engineer*, carrying the exploration company of Major Stephen M. Long, was the first to reach Council Bluffs in 1819, the first steamboat to ascend the upper Missouri for commercial purposes was the *Yellowstone* in 1833. William Becknell initiated trade with Santa Fe in 1821, leaving from Franklin, MO, where steamboats delivered commodities. Franklin served as the eastern terminus until the 1828 flood destroyed the town. Santa Fe traders by that time had found other points of departure, and over time such places as Blue Mills, Independence, Fort Leavenworth, and eventually Westport (mod-

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STEAMBOAT ARABIA

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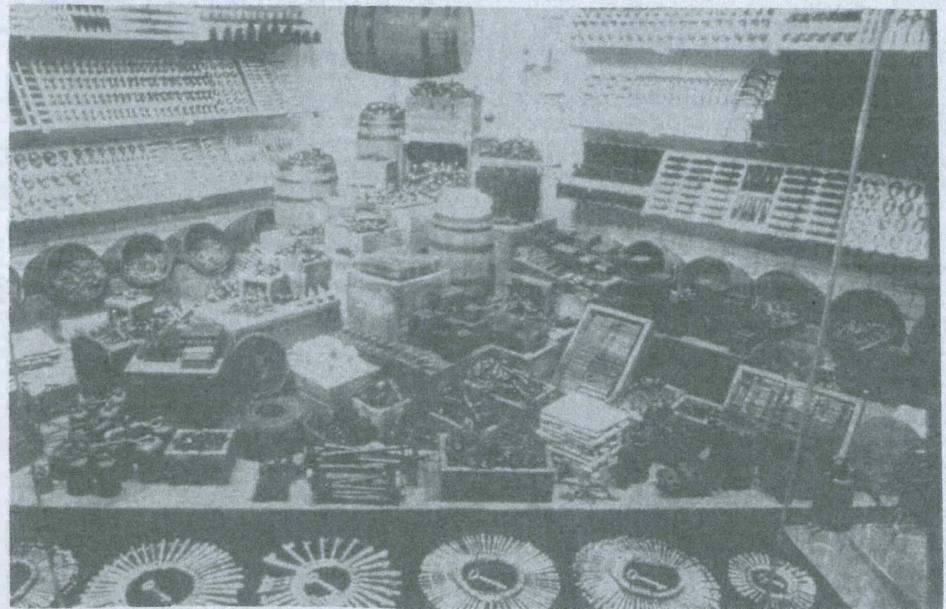
ern Kansas City) shared in the trade.

During the 1840s steamboat technology improved and settled on the packet, a sidewheeler driven by two powerful steam engines, designed to carry the maximum number of passengers and tonnage of freight. "Loaded flat," with the main deck only inches above the water, a packet could realize its cost of construction in one trip. There were no Coast Guard regulations in those days, so every inch of space was packed to capacity. A 171-foot steamer, such as the *Arabia*, would carry well over 200 tons of cargo and over 100 passengers, with 50-plus crew members, for a jam-packed trip "loaded flat."

Most westward-bound emigrants from the eastern U.S. funneled into the entrepot, St. Louis. After 1831, the majority continued up the river to Independence—the principal outfitting and jumping-off point for the Santa Fe and Oregon trails—a 427-river-mile trip of usually five to seven days. The "Big Muddy" or "Ole Missury," as the Missouri was often called, generally could be navigated from March to November. Outfitters and forwarding and commission merchants laid in supplies, gear, and merchandise shipped in from the East during the fall months, so as to be ready for the spring rush.

During the 1850s Westport Landing (Port of Kansas) replaced Independence as the predominant eastern terminus of the Santa Fe Trail. As more powerful steamboats pushed higher up the river, the levees of Fort Leavenworth also sprouted warehouses filled with Trail goods, both imports and exports. Steamboat entrepreneurs hustled for the lucrative outfitter's business. According to the *Kansas City Times*, May 30, 1897, river traffic to the Port was heaviest in the years 1856-1858 because of the Santa Fe trade. For instance, 125 steamboats delivered over 75 million pounds of merchandise during the navigation season of 1857.

As Trail traffic grew military posts were built to protect the wagon trains, and the forts had to be supplied, adding considerably to the amount of freight shipped westward. The majority of Missouri River boats held government contracts to transport commissary supplies, quartermaster equipment, ordnance stores, mules, and other necessities to Fort Leavenworth, thence, to wagon trains for the Trail. In March 1855 Majors and Russell signed a two-year government con-



Building hardware is artfully displayed, including locks and keys, weight scales, kegs of nails, windowpanes, and numerous other items, in the Arabia Steamboat Museum. (Photo by David Hawley.)

tract that gave them a virtual monopoly of Army freighting west of the Missouri River. Alexander Majors, as did the Glasgows, well-known Santa Fe Trail merchants, either owned shares in a fleet of steamboats or had one built specifically for the trade.

Aficionados of the Santa Fe Trail often concentrate on the means of travel and trade on the land road, but the river route played a major role in that commerce. Water travel was faster and cheaper than by land, and commodities were shipped up and down the river between St. Louis and Kansas City.

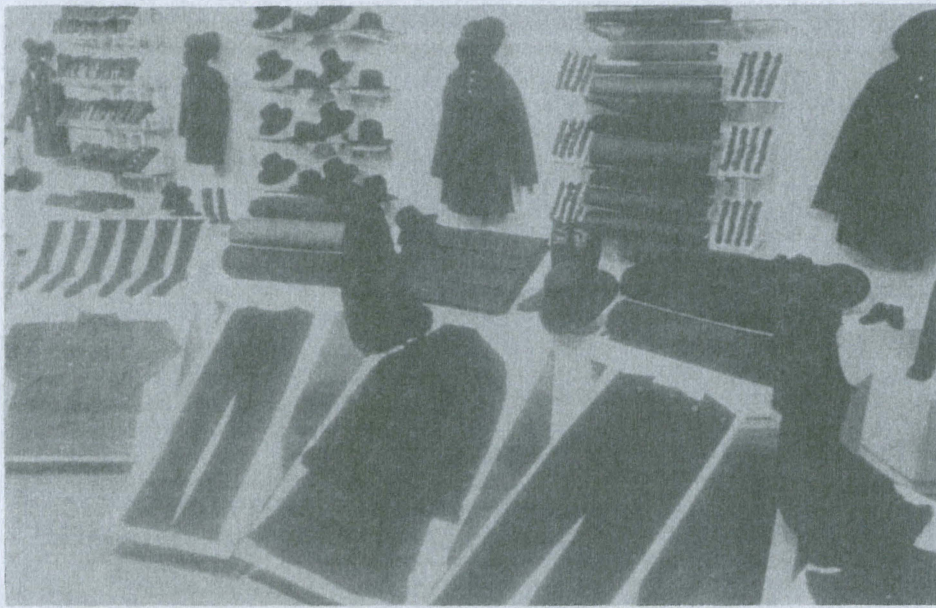
Approximately 700 steamboats navigated the Missouri River after 1819. Of those 700, over 300 wrecks were strewn up and down the riverbed and in cornfields from St. Louis to South Dakota. Over 30 were clustered around the Kansas City area.

The *Arabia* was one of those, and it was engaged in the commerce of the West although no actual records have been found to prove that it specifically was contracted to Santa Fe Trail outfitters. In all probability, however, the *Arabia* handled freight both upriver and downriver that was part of that enterprise and carried passengers who traveled on the Trail. This particular side-wheeler's importance is that, although it sank in 1856, it was excavated, salvaged, and is displayed in a museum where one can view a microcosm of the frontier material culture of the 1850s. The cargo was typical of what was carried on the Santa Fe Trail. It is fitting, too, that the museum is

located two blocks from the old Kansas-Westport Landing.

Built in 1853, on the banks of the Monongahela River at Brownsville, Pennsylvania, the hull of the *Arabia* was 171 feet long, 29 feet wide, with a 4¾-foot-deep hold. The cargo capacity was listed at 222 tons. The sidewheeler ran on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers until purchased in February 1855, for \$20,000, by Captain J. S. Shaw of St. Charles, MO. With government contract in hand, Captain Shaw directed the transport of army personnel and supplies from St. Louis to Fort Leavenworth, part of which the steamer carried on upriver to Fort Pierre (near present-day Pierre, SD) in July of that year.

Shaw sold three-fourths interest to Captain J. William Terrill and George W. Boyd, of St. Louis, in the spring of 1856. In May, the *Arabia* became embroiled in the "uncivil war" raging between Missouri and Kansas. The New England Emigrant Aid Society, anonymously, had shipped 100 Sharps rifles in boxes marked "Tools" bound for partisans in Lawrence, K. T. Border Ruffians had been tipped off and, at Lexington the proslavery hotbed of Missouri, forcibly removed the guns, only to find out that the farsighted shippers had removed the breechlocks. After this much-publicized incident, the *Arabia* gained the reputation of a gun-runner. That, along with the information that the boat was carrying over 400 barrels of Kentucky bourbon whiskey on her fatal trip, contributed to five salvage attempts over a 133-



Thousands of clothing items survived in the buried hull of the *Arabia*, including 4,000 boots and shoes, 300 hats, dozens of coats, socks, and nearly 100 bolts of silk and wool material. (Photo by David Hawley.)

year period, after it sunk six months later.

In the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, April 1, 1856, a ballyhoo announced the first trip of the season: "The good and staunch steamer *Arabia*, Captain Terrill on deck and Mr. Boyd in the office will leave for St. Joseph this morning at 10 o'clock. The *Arabia* has excellent accommodations for passengers and the officers are the right sort of men. Go aboard the *Arabia* and be at home." There is no record of how many round-trips the side-wheeler made during the six months before she sank, however, depending on the river levels, turn-around trips occurred as soon as the steamer was reloaded and passengers were aboard.

On September 5, 1856, after off-loading cargo and some passengers at the Port of Kansas, the "Great White" *Arabia*, as it was called, with 130 passengers on board, headed upriver late in the afternoon, bound for Council Bluffs. At the supper hour the steamer ran head-on into a walnut sawyer (a snag that was hidden just under the waterline) and sank within ten minutes. There was no loss of human life. During the excavation a skeleton of a mule with saddle, bridle, and saddle roll still attached was found. The reins were still tied to a lumber mill on deck. Christened "Lawrence of the *Arabia*," this victim is featured in a recently-opened exhibit.

The Missouri River is noted for its fast current, tortuous channels, underwater hazards, mud content, and rapid bank erosion. A steamboat

wreck could be covered with sand within 24 hours, leaving a small window to save cargo, personal belongings, and equipment on board. If possible the owner could recoup some of the loss by salvaging the machinery and recycling it on a new riverboat.

After the initial salvage attempt, which netted only the starboard engine, the remains of the *Arabia* were covered by tons of sand. The ever-changing river channel eventually moved one-half mile north of its final resting place during the 133-year period.

The search, excavation, and salvage of the *Arabia* by River Salvage, Inc., is ably told by co-owner David Hawley in *The Treasures of the Steamboat Arabia*. Since space does not permit delving into the fascinating mechanics and ingenuity of the actual excavation and recovery, Hawley's book is highly recommended, as is a visit to the *Arabia* Museum in Kansas City.

After finding the steamer under a soybean field on the Norman Sorter farm in 1987, excavation began Nov. 7, 1988, after the bean harvest. Since the water table was only 10 feet below the surface, pumping was the essential process for the success of the operation. Twenty wells were drilled to 65 feet around the side-wheeler's outline. The pumps ran continuously around the clock, and the water was drained off by a plastic-lined ditch, dubbed the "Arabia Canal" to the river one-half mile away. The excavation grew to the size of a football field.

On November 26, at a depth of 45

feet, the first welcome glimpse was the *Arabia's* 50-foot-long wooden beams of the paddle wheel. On Nov. 30 a Good-year rubber shoe, patented in 1849, was uncovered, the first of tons of artifacts now regarded as the treasures of the steamer. Gold, Sharps rifles, and whiskey barrels were not found, but over 200 tons of cargo, the majority well preserved in blue clay, will provide years of conservation effort and study to add to our knowledge of the 1850s frontier life and economy.

To this steamboat historian, the excitement of the chance to stand on the *Arabia's* main deck and peer into the fireboxes, measure the "doctor" which pumped the river water into the boilers, and help to uncover boxes that held tools, pickles, pie fillings, with labels still readable, is beyond description. I have a finer regard and awe of what it took to navigate the water and land highways to the West. Of great value is the fact that the boilers, engine, doctor, pumps, blacksmithy, and other equipment were on board and now reside in the museum for further study—the only such collection of Western riverboat steam equipment of that era in the United States.

The engine has been restored and drives a replica paddle-wheel that gently splashes in a pool in front of a diorama of the levee and town of Kansas. The members of River Salvage, Inc., knew the "treasure trove" and story of the "Great White" *Arabia* should be shared with us all.

Three years to the day after the excavation began, on November 13, 1991, the *Arabia* Steamboat Museum was opened to the public. The long sought-after riverboat that carried "everything from pickles to people" thus lives on. Over half a million visitors have toured the 30,000 square-foot museum, with over 150,000 more expected during 1995.

You will marvel over the priceless collections of finery, ironstone gold-rimmed china, gold-plated dinner ware, perfumes, Wedgewood pitchers and wash basins, and tools and hardware. You may muse over the artwork and styles of exhibits on 1850s steamboating, watch the actual cleaning of artifacts, and talk to the conservators in the preservation lab.

You are invited to "come aboard the *Arabia* and feel at home!" Visitors cross a gangplank onto the mock-up of the steamer's main deck with machinery in place. Members of River Salvage, Inc., are often on the deck to talk about their adventures and the time capsule of 1850s commerce and travel. See it for yourself and puzzle the blending of river and Trail commerce.