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Transportation
(Indiana)

BOATMEN

ON THE

WABASH

1830



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WABASH
1830**

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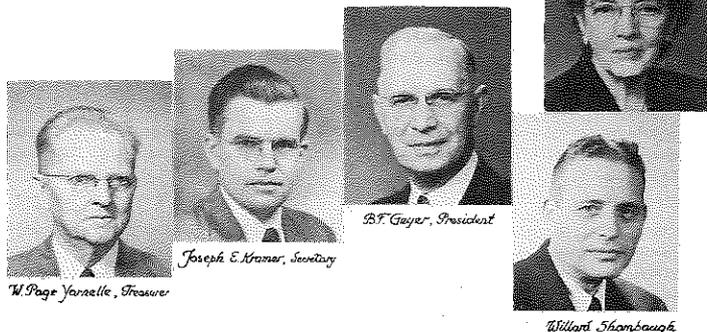
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FOREWORD

The following article briefly describes boating and boatmen on the Wabash in 1830. It first appeared in the INDIANAPOLIS NEWS on December 27, 1883. The Boards and the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County present this publication in the hope that it will interest and inform local readers. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar have been changed to conform to current usage.

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When we contemplate the speed and comfort with which we may now travel from one section of this vast country to another and contrast it with the modes of travel of little more than half a century ago, we are struck with astonishment at the marvelous changes which have been brought about. In those days we looked upon our great rivers as the mighty channels by means of which the products of one region were transported to distant places. The rivers are nature's highways, and those ancient inhabitants of America, the Mound Builders, were aware of the fact. The ruins that mark the sites of their villages are to be found only along the eligible shores of the great rivers and their tributaries. A simple raft furnished the first means of transportation; this was followed by the canalboat, the flatboat or broadhorn, the keelboat, and later, the steamboat. The early steamboats were very small; only by degrees did they reach the size and imposing grandeur of our present river boats and ocean steamers. After Robert Fulton had first successfully applied steam to propel boats, many years of further experiment were required before steamboats could compete in economy of operation with the pirogue or the keelboat.

The keelboat of which I write was about the size and shape of today's canalboat. To man a keelboat required a captain and six to eight men, depending on the size of the boat and the nature of the river to be navigated. There were various methods of propelling the boat. It was carried downstream by the force of the current and was often brought back up the stream by cordelling. Where the shore would permit and where the current was not too strong, one end of a cable was made fast to a post on deck; then the crew, grasping the other end of the cable, would walk along the shore and cordelle, or pull the boat along. Sometimes the rope was made fast to a tree on the riverbank, and the boat was hauled forward a cable's length by means of a windlass on board. This process was repeated until the swiftest parts of the stream were passed. In some places where the depth of water was not too great, setting poles were used. Each

pole was about fifteen feet long, armed at one end with an iron spike and a hook. The spike served to give steady hold on the bottom, while the hook served to catch hold of bushes and to hold the boat in place. On the other end of the pole was a round knob. On each side of the boat there was a plank walk about a foot wide fitted with cleats which were set at regular distances to prevent the men's feet from slipping. When setting poles were to be used, an equal number of men were stationed on each side of the boat. They would place the points of the poles on the bottom of the river and the other ends of the poles against their shoulders. As soon as the leaders had taken a step or two toward the stern, pushing the boat forward with all their might, then the second and third couples would follow in regular order, keeping step to the "Heave ahead!" of the leaders. When they reached the stern of the boat, they would all walk forward again, dragging the ends of the poles in the water. Then they would repeat the procedure as long as the depth of water was favorable for such work. At other times, under suitable conditions, a single sail was used. By the means here stated, keelboats, loaded with manufactures from the North, were run from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. They returned loaded with sugar, molasses, and other tropical products.

A great many keelboats were engaged in the business; they were to be found on all the streams that afforded water enough to float them. The crews were composed of large, strong, hardy, rough, and reckless men. Card-playing, gambling, and drinking whisky occupied all their leisure time. They were ever ready to avenge a real or an imaginary insult by a rough and tumble fight or with pistols and daggers; and woe betide the unlucky man who fell under their displeasure. An insult offered to one was held as a wrong done to the whole fraternity, and sooner or later the offender received chastisement in one form or another.

As late as 1830, the Wabash River had regular and transient keelboats engaged in traversing its waters to its mouth



The crews..

and from thence to New Orleans. Shawneetown, ten miles below the mouth of the Wabash, was a great rendezvous for keelboatmen. Here they would congregate, get drunk, and keep the citizens in dread of their lives and property as long as their sprees lasted. No one was bold enough to show resentment at their daring insults.

In the early days of which I write, New Harmony, sixty miles above the mouth of the Wabash, was a village of considerable importance. It carried on a large trade with Vincennes and other towns on the upper Wabash, and it was likewise a great stopping place for the keelboats. In the fall of 1830 a number of these boats met at New Harmony. The crews, comprising some thirty or fifty men, went on a big spree and decided to "take" the town. They shouldered their spiked poles, tying a red shirt to one for a banner, and marched up into the town, blowing tin horns and beating tin pans for drums. They rent the air with yells, vulgar epithets, and declarations that they would thrash the men and carry off the women. Fortunately for the town, it had a company of military volunteers; this was promptly called out by Captain Richard Owen. The citizens, gathering up what arms they could, joined the soldiers, and all marched to the defense of their homes and families.

In the meantime the saloons in the town had surrendered discreetly, and the boatmen were regaling themselves with the fruits of their easy victory. When they saw that the citizens were aroused and prepared to attack, the "invaders" contemplated meeting them. Standing in bold defiance across the street, their spiked poles held at charge, they presented a formidable appearance. Each man looked like a Hercules in stature. But when the soldiers came marching quickly down the street with bright muskets and fixed bayonets gleaming in the sun, the boatmen's courage failed and they broke and ran for their boats. The soldiers, followed by a crowd of citizens armed with rifles and shotguns, pursued them and demanded that they throw down their poles and surrender. It was a little over a quarter of a



.ran his bayonet through the arm..

mile to where the boats lay, and the boatmen were overtaken by the time they had reached the levee that crosses the low bottom bordering the river. George White, who lived in Shawneetown but happened to be at New Harmony with his wife on a visit to her parents, ran his bayonet through the arm of one of the most defiant and abusive boatmen. The rest, finding that the soldiers and citizens meant business, laid down their poles. They were marched back to the magistrate's office, where they submitted to a heavy fine for disturbing the peace.

New Harmony never again suffered insults from drunken boatmen, but the boatmen wreaked their vengeance on George White by setting fire to his large and valuable sawmill in Shawneetown, burning it to the ground. George White was a brave and fearless man when he could meet his enemy face to face. But he well knew that to rebuild his mill would only afford the villains another opportunity to do him a wrong. He sold out his home at Shawneetown and moved to New Harmony. Steamboats soon replaced the keelboats, and the people of the small river towns were no longer in terror of their approach.

A few years later, one of the boatmen who had engaged in the attack on New Harmony murdered a man in White County, Illinois. He was hanged at Carmi, the county seat. I believe that was the first hanging in this part of the country, and a great crowd assembled from all parts within a radius of more than fifty miles. The sheriff used a tarred rope, which was the only kind he could get, but it did the business nicely, ridding the country of a dangerous villain.