

Steamboat in the Arkansas River snags.



Photo courtesy of History Division, Corps of Engineers

THE BUSY LITTLE RIVER STEAMERS

Steamboats on the Arkansas?

Yes. In the years after the War of 1812, steamers puffed their way from New Orleans and St. Louis against the mighty currents of the Mississippi and up the Arkansas, opening the region to commerce and travel heretofore unthinkable.

The Army Engineers were charged with keeping the routes cleared through such snagging and clearing operations as could be conducted with limited funds.

"The life of the busy little river steamers was a precarious one," wrote historian Grant Foresman. "[S]nags, fires and boiler explosions claimed them nearly all sooner or later; few were permitted to wear out in the service."²

"These early steamboat captains were as adventurous as the hardy pioneers who were then beating back the wilderness in their struggle to establish themselves," wrote Floyd Clay.³

"The rivers were capricious, indolent, raging, turgid, peaceful, and ominous, according to the whim of nature, but the captains took them on with amazing success. As in a cat-and-mouse game, captains eyed currents with nervous concern, and took the most logical chances. To miscalculate was generally disastrous."

Navigation, according to Settle, was possible only when there was sufficient water in the unpredictable streams.

"Especially constructed boats of 75 to 150 tons burden that required the smallest possible draught still had difficulties. The shallow rapids at Webbers Falls and the Devil's Race Ground, 17 to 20 miles below Fort Gibson, were particularly hazardous, requiring skill to navigate in addition to favorable water conditions. Delays were frequent due to low water, boats running aground on sandbars, or hitting snags, concealed rocks, and trees floating under the surface."

But even with such difficulties, steamer travel was luxurious when compared to land travel in a region where roads were generally instruments of torture.

A missionary among the Creeks compared a 600-mile horseback ride into Indian Territory in 1841 on "that most miserable wagon road" to his relatively comfortable six-week steamer trip on the Arkansas the following year:

"On the evening of the 8th of February our little steamer left the red and brackish waters of the Arkansas and entered our own little river the deep and clear and beautiful virdigris [sic].

"As she hastened over the short distance of four miles to the head of Navigation, carrying us swiftly to our destined home, the Creeks, in considerable numbers, made their appearance along the bank to gaze on the scene . . ."⁴