



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Steamboat Captain David L Keiser's Recollections of Life on the Missouri

Full Citation: Carl Hugh Jones, ed, "Steamboat Captain David L Keiser's Recollections of Life on the Missouri," *Nebraska History* 74 (1993): 82-86

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1993Steamboat.pdf>

Date: 8/19/2013

Article Summary: In 1902 David Keiser, a second-generation Missouri River steamboat captain, wrote the letter presented here. It describes his life on the river, which had begun half a century earlier.

Cataloging Information:

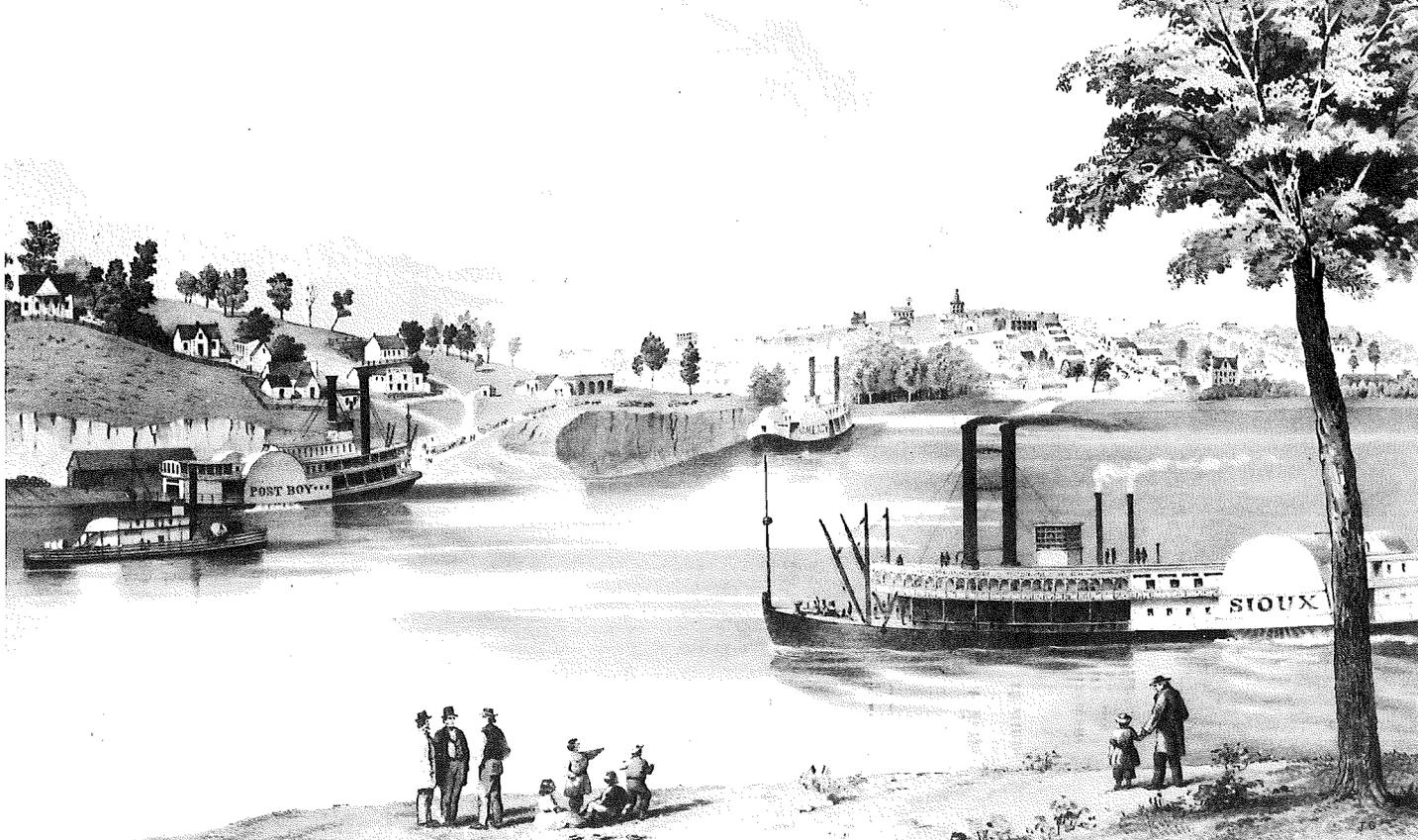
Names: David L Keiser, John W Keiser, John P Keiser, Horace Bixby

Nebraska Place Names: Brownsville, Omaha, Nebraska City, Plattsmouth

Steamboats on Which Keiser Worked: *Charles H Harden*, *E M Ryland*, *Rowena*, *Omaha City*, *Isabella*, *Gerard B Allen*, *Nellie Rogers*, *Hattie May*, *St Johns*

Keywords: Pikes Peak Expedition, Indians, John Cosgrove, *Sioux City* (Charles Baker, captain)

Photographs / Images: Nebraska City river front, 1865 (from a sketch by Alfred E Mathews); John P Keiser; inset advertisement for the Brownville Ferry Company (*Nebraska Advertiser*, November 11, 1870)



Nebraska City river front, 1865. From a sketch by Alfred E. Mathews. NSHS Collections.

STEAMBOAT CAPTAIN DAVID L. KEISER'S RECOLLECTIONS OF LIFE ON THE MISSOURI

Edited by Carl Hugh Jones

INTRODUCTION

In December of 1984 James Swift, the "old boat" authority on the staff of the *Waterways Journal*, a St. Louis-based weekly considered the bible of today's working riverboat men, asked about a notice in a back issue of the *Waterways Journal* concerning a Missouri River session to be held January 13 and 14, 1903, at the year's annual meeting of the Nebraska State His-

torical Society in Lincoln. Only one of the papers, "Personal Recollections of Early Days in Decatur, Nebraska," by Captain S. T. Leaming, was then published.¹ Still remaining in Society collections is a paper written in 1902 as a letter to Society Director Addison E. Sheldon by David L. Keiser, a second-generation Missouri River steamboat man then living in Boonville, Missouri.² Captain Keiser was the son of Captain John W. Keiser and Elizabeth McMurtry and a brother of Captain John P. and Charles W. Keiser of St. Louis.³

Captain David L. Keiser began his steamboating career under the tute-

lage of his brother, John P., in 1856. His 1902 recollections of details of his life on the Missouri include a few inaccurate dates and factual errors. For example, he said he was on the *Hattie May* in 1857, but the boat was not built until 1864, its first enrollment (number ninety-one) occurring at St. Louis on September 7 of that year. It was lost to ice at St. Louis on January 12, 1866. It is most likely that Keiser was aboard in 1865. He also failed to mention the *Shawnee* as one of his father's boats, perhaps because his father was on the *Shawnee* in 1839 and 1840, too early for David to recall. But these errors can be overlooked when one realizes

Carl Hugh Jones is the former curator of the Museum of Missouri River History aboard the dredge Captain Meriwether Lewis at Brownville.

that Sheldon's invitation to Captain Keiser to speak was mailed December 22 and the answer dated December 29, just a week afterward with the program only two weeks later.

At the end of his letter Keiser asked Sheldon to put it in better form and to delete whatever he wanted. The editor has retained the original spelling and style so that the reader has some idea of the language of this old steamboat captain. Punctuation has been added.

THE LETTER

Boonville Cooper County, Mo.,
Dec the 29th, 1902

A E Sheldon
Lincoln, Neb.
Dear Sir-

Yours of the 22nd received requesting me to give my Experience & recollection of the Early navigation on the Missouri river. I will try and give it to you as it was photographed on my brain.

In the first place my father, Jno. W. Keiser, was Captain and part-owner of the *Saint Peters*, a side wheel steamer, in 1839, & 40, running from St. Louis as high up as Old Fort Peere, in the interest of the American fur company.⁴ This Boat superceded the Keel Boats, which were cordelled by hand, [and] which supplied the Fur Company's trading Posts. Bellevue, Neb was one of them. One of his Pilots was Black Dave, a Negro who had learn[ed] the river on the fur Company Keel Boats. This was before the government issued licenses. My Father was also Capt & owner of several other boats that ran in the Upper River trade, the Steamers *Emily*, *Bertrand*, & *Julia*.⁵ He died in 1849.

I was a small boy then and accompanied him on several trips. Nebraska then was in full Possession of the Indians. In 1856 I went on the river to learn Piloting with my Brother, John P. Keiser, who was a Pilot on the steamer *Cataract*, running in the "Lightning Line" from Jefferson City to Weston Mo.⁶ There was also a line of steamers

running from St. Louis to Leavensworth, Kansas. I received my License as Pilot in 1858.

All of these boats were crowded to their full capacity with passenger[s] and freight, as the Kansas Emigration was in full blast. My first birth [berth] was on the *Charles H. Harden*. She was bought to run as a ferry at Plattsmouth, Neb. in 1856, and she ran there as such until the Civil War commenced. The ice, I think, sunk her. The ferry owners then bought a ferry Boat from my mother, the *Paul Wilcox*, in 1861. My first trip as Assistant Pilot was on the Steamer *E. M. Ryland*, Capt. Charles Blunt [Blount], to Sioux City.⁷

In 1857 Brownsville was a very small town, not more than 3 or 4 hundred houses, and when the boat landed all of the inhabitants would come down to the Landing old & young. Nebraska City was not much larger. The River then ran close by the town, and had a good Landing. Plattsmouth was also a small town. Omaha was a small vilage. I do not think there was over 500 houses stuck up on the Hill. There was a high dry sand bar in front of the town half a mile from the Bluff. Omaha did not impress me then as Ever being much of a place. [As] Soon as Pikes Peak Emigration commenced you could see Nebraska City and Omaha grow. The Missouri refugees came there by the hundreds, and Omaha was there starting point to Pikes Peak. Some would push a wheel barrow with there camping outfit on it across the plains as it was called then, some would put there pack on there back and hoof it up the Platt. Nebraska then was reaching out for statehood and every one who owned a Quarter section on the River had it laid off in Town lots.

I recolect on my first trip up there in fifty seven, there was a passenger on board who wished to get off at Lake View 30 miles above Omaha.⁸ We arrived there soon after dark. There was a sign board with Lake View on it, and not a House closer than Omaha. The passenger got off and there was noth-

ing but a pond just back of the bank. The boat was pushing off to proceed when we heard him yelling to please let him on board again, which we did. The next morning he showed us the map of the town and said the parties he bought the lot from was in Boston, and represented the town as having 10,000 inhabitants, a 50,000 \$ Court-House, 3 Churches, and a splendid view of the Lake which was filled with Pleasure boats &. Some one remarked, "When you catch a Sucker, mash his head." He returned more wise than when he came. We then went on and came to Decatur. It was a small vilage with a Saw Mill. The houses were all box houses and made of cotton wood lumber. Omadi, I believe, only had three Houses and a wood yard.

In the fall of 1857 I was on the steamer *Isabella* as assistant Pilot or Cub Pilot, as I was called, with my brother Jno. P. Keiser. Capt Horrace Bixby was the other Pilot. He, Bixby, was the man who taught Sam Clemens (Mark Twain) the Lower Mississippi river.⁹ On this trip, we stoped at the Black Bird, or Omaha Mission and was taking on some cord wood that belonged to the Indians. While there a fine Buck Indian came up into the Pilot-House all blanketed, painted, and feathers in his head. I held out my hand and said *How* when he smiled and said *good Evening* and wished to know where the Captain was. I escorted him to the Capt. The river bank was caving in pretty fast and the Captain agreed to take all of the wood. My brother asked him how he came to speak such good English and go back to paint & Blankets. He said that he graduated at Yale College, and learnt enough English to swindle those Indians. He got them to cut & hawl the wood for him for almost nothing and as for the blanket, he would not give it and his Pony for all of the United States. He had no taxes to pay and nothing to worry over.

In 1859 I was assistant Pilot on the steamer *Rowena*, Capt. Jno. Dozier.¹⁰ We Made one trip to Omaha. (She was

beginning to put on City Air). There was several brick stores & a Hotel. We landed at a wood yard half a mile below where the bridge is now and while wooding I saw a man coming up the bank fanning himself with a brush. I asked him if the mosquitoes were very bad. He said they were not up here but they were just H--- down there, pointing to his cabin. I was capt of the steamer *Omaha City* in 1863, runing from St. Louis to Glasgow, Mo.¹¹ I was Pilot of the *Isabella* in 1859 and we had a full cargo of freight for Nebraska City. It was consigned to Waddle [Waddell], Russel & Co, they were the overland freighters. This freight was mostly for Military Post[s]. There freight bill amounted to 5,000\$ The war came on in 1861 and the gov pressed all the Missouri Boats in to service and business in Nebraska almost came to a stand still,

After the war I was in comand of the Steamer *Gerard B. Allen*.¹² We brought up on her the first Steam Plow that was used in Nebraska. It was for parties living near Lincoln. From 1865 to 1867 there was not enough Boats runing on the Missouri to suply the demand to Omaha. There was a line of large sise side wheel Steamers runing from St. Louis to Omaha, none of them less than 250 long & 40 foot beam and with accomodations for 100 passengers in the cabin. A large no of the Passengers would take deck passage as it was less than half fare. There was over 100 boats runing from St Louis to Leavensworth, Kansas, and Omaha in 1869 and the busines at Omaha was immense. This High dry Sand Bar in front of the City then was covered with freight – some trips a boat would have difficulty in finding room to discharge there freight. There was R Road ties piled 8 feet high and 100 yds. deep. They were rafted down the river from above, all cottonwood wood. When landed they were put in to a large vat and went threw some chemical process. The contractor told me it preserved them. They were used in bldg the U. Pacific.



Captain John P. Keiser. From E. W. Gould's *Fifty Years on the Mississippi* (1889).

In the sixties the steamer *Sioux City*, Capt Charles Baker, came very near losing his boat in the long bend some 30 miles below Omaha.¹³ When the cut-off was made she had gone around the bend and when the bank gave a way she was drawn in to the vortex. She roled and tumbled. Every one thought she was lost and all would perish, but she wallowed thru and come out safe, and in a few hours the channel cut out and she passed up thru it safely The farmers are now cultivating the ground where the boats used to run. It was a good 3 hours run around the bend some 15 miles.

On one of my Omaha trips the freight bill at Omaha was paid with a draft on the Brownsville Bank. The boat got a ground and the clerk got in the yawl and got there before 3 P M., [and] presented his draft. The Cashier scratched his head, paid the draft, and then put up the shutters and a sign on the door, Suspended. The clerk came

aboard smiling and said that he had busted one bank and it was not a farro bank eather. In 1868 I was pilot on the stern wheel steamer *Nellie Rogers*, with a mountain trip.¹⁴ In the bend above Rulo she run aground and before she could be gotten off, the River fell 9 feet and we were there 21 days when the chanel came back and washed her in. Three days after we run aground the sand bar became dry. The cook had to carry water 100 yds. to cook with. She [the boat] sliped in to the water with out any mishap and we proceeded on and made a successful trip.

The country above Sioux City was uninhabited. You could not see a white man except at the Forts. It took about 3 months to make the trip. As there was no wood yds. above Sioux City, half the time was taken up in cutting drift-wood. Pilots to the mountains were in demand. Some received as high as 1000\$ per month. Freight to Fort Benton was 15cts per lb., passage 125\$ cabin, 75\$ deck. In 1869 I was returnng home on the steamer *Saint Johns* and opposite Milk River I met a small Stern Wheel Boat. Capt. Woolfolk was in command¹⁵ and I went aboard to get the news from the states. The Crew and Passengers were all excited. The indians had captured a man off of her the day before and burnt him in sight of the boat and while they were telling me, we heard the crew yelling Indians-Indians and the crew came runing aboard of the Boat and in a few minutes one of the passengers came runing up the steps and into the cabin stark naked. The Indians had striped him and then he broke loose from them. The crew & passengers of this boat reconoitered and saw 5 of them. The Indians got a way, and we soon got a way. We were not hunting for Indians then very much, as we had not lost any. I expect you are tired reading all of this stuff. If not cut out what you wish or all of it and if you use it please correct and remodel.

Col. John Cosgrove, a lawyer in Boonville, Cooper Co. Mo., was one of the wheel barrow brigade that left

Omaha for Pikes Peak in the fifties. He could give you some very interesting accounts of his trip up the Platt River.

The party who owns the Steam Boat Photographs is Charles W. Sombart, Pres. of Sombarts Milling & Mercantile Co. Boonville, Cooper Co, Mo. If my account of the early history of the river is not satisfactory stop off at Boonville. Write when you will be there and you can interview me. I will meet you any old time and you may be able to get it in better shape. You will have to remodel it any how. The good old days will never come again. Nearly all of the Old steam Boat men have passed away.

The R Roads have completely monopolised both sides of the river to Benton. I suppose it is all for the best.

Respectfully Yours

David L. Keiser

P.S. in 1857 [1865] I was Pilot on the *Hattie May*.¹⁶

We wooded 5 miles above Sioux City and was 5 hours going around the bend and then wooded again at the same mans wood yard. I asked him how far across to the first wood yard. He said half a mile, The river cut through there in 1870 and several thousand acres have been made to Nebraska. In 1869 I was Capt. & Pilot on the steamer *St. Johns* and at the old Fort Assinaboine I stoped to get some wood that the Indians had cut.¹⁷ I met old Joe Ramsey there an old mountaineer, who had been up there all of his life.¹⁸ He told me to get away as quick as I could that the Indians were mad. I did so and that evening they crossed the river and went up to Fort Mussle shell and attacked the Fort. There were only 20 men in it and there were 150 Indians. The men armed them selves with there winchesters and plenty of ammuniton run out of the fort and got on the high bank above the Indians and then commenced to slaughter them and when the fight was over there was 100 good Indians laying on the ground. 50 was all that ever got back. The white men cut off 12 of the Indians' heads and boiled them in Lye and sent them to the St. Louis Musium. I arrived there the next day.¹⁹

The Mountain boats could [get] no fresh meat above Sioux City except what they could kill. Buffalo, Elk, & deer were in abundance. The buffalo were never out of sight from Fort Randal to Benton. Sometimes there would be several hundred thousand in one heard grasing on the banks. It was just like shooting down a beef in a correll. Ice was gotten out of the sand bars, Early in the spring. I have written on a slip of paper some jokes on Capt. Frank La Barge, one of the Earliest of Pilots.²⁰ You can publish it if you wish or cut it out. Please put this in

better form if you wish to use it and oblige.

Yours Respectfully David L. Keiser.

NOTES

¹Captain S. T. Leaming, "Personal Recollections of Early Days in Decatur, Nebraska," 15 (10 of Series 2) *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society* (1907):77-83.

²David L. Keiser Collection, MS1118, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society.

³Ibid. John W. Keiser (1801-49), father of David L., was born in Fayette County, Kentucky. He married Elizabeth McMurtry and moved to Boone County, Missouri, in 1828. He had entered the steamboat business by 1838. John W. and Elizabeth had at least three sons: John P., Charles W., and David L. *St. Joseph Gazette*, Aug. 31, 1849.

⁴The first steamboat with which John W. Keiser was officially associated was the *St. Peters*, built in 1836. She made trips to the Upper Missouri in 1837. In 1838-39 with Keiser as master, she was a packet in the St. Louis to Fort Leavenworth trade. Keiser was not known to have been associated with the *St. Peters* in 1840, when she was making trips on the Illinois River.

⁵John W. Keiser's second boat was the *Shawnee*, a sidewheel steamer of 164 tons built at Pittsburgh in 1839. The *Emilie* was named for Pierre Chouteau's wife and was built for Chouteau and J. W. Keiser at Pittsburgh in 1841. The *Bertrand*, a sidewheeler of 145 tons, was built in 1844 at Pittsburgh. The *Julia*, Keiser's last boat, was built at Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, in 1846. He was still a part owner at the time of his death.

The real name of Black Dave was Jacques Desire. Phil E. Chappell, "A History of the Missouri River," *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, 1905-1906, 9 (1906), 283.

⁶John Pinkney Keiser (1833-1901), older brother of David L., received his first Missouri River pilot's license in 1853, and during his lifetime built and controlled fifty-eight steamboats. He was associated with the Memphis and St. Louis Packet Company, which eventually became the Anchor Line Company of which he was president from 1882 to 1884. *Waterways Journal*, Nov. 25, 1939, 122. Howard Louis Conard, ed., *Encyclopedia of the History of Missouri* (New York, Louisville, St. Louis: The Southern History Company, 1901), 515-6.

The *Cataract* in 1856 was piloted by John P. Keiser, who earned \$1,000 a month. The Pacific Railroad Packet Line, also known as the Lightning Line, was formed in the summer of 1856 by Captains Barton Able and Louis A. Welton. In 1858 the line consisted of six boats but was dissolved at the end of that season.

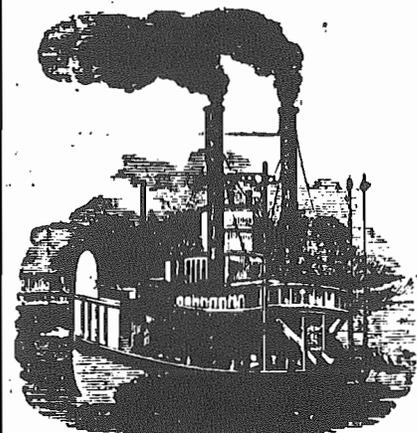
⁷The *Charles H. Harden* was probably a ferry at Plattsmouth in 1858. The ferry *Paul Wilcox* was built at Boonville, Missouri, in 1860 and sold to the city of Plattsmouth by the Plattsmouth Ferry Company.

Charles W. Blunt (also Blount) was master of the *E. M. Ryland* when David L. Keiser became assistant pilot in 1858.

⁸This town was probably on the Iowa shore. It's possible that the mythical city was Riverview,

Nebraska Advertiser, November 11, 1870.

NEW STEAM FERRY



The Brownville Ferry Company
have now running between

BROWNVILLE, NEB.,

AND

North Star and Phelps City, Mo.,

the new and commodious Steam Ferry

MARY J. ARNOLD!

THIS BOAT is entirely new, with power and capacity to cross everything that may come in any weather. For crossing Cattle into or out of this Land District, this is the best point. This boat is especially fitted up to ensure safety in crossing stock, and large cattle pens are already erected at the St. Joe. & C. B. Depot at Phelps City. We can insure the travelling public that all in our power shall be done to make this the most reliable crossing on the Missouri river.

BROWNVILLE FERRY CO.

13-25-77

a landing and sawmill about six miles below Decatur.

⁹The *Isabella* was a large sidewheel steamer built in 1857. In 1858 Capt. John P. Keiser bought an interest in her and served as her master until 1861. Lytle and Holdcamper, *Merchant Steam Vessels*; Frederick Way Jr., *Way's Packet Directory 1848-1983, Passenger Steamboats of the Mississippi River System Since the Advent of Photography in Mid-Continent America* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, 1983).

Horace E. Bixby (1826-1912), one of the best known of the river pilots, is remembered chiefly as Samuel Clemens's mentor.

¹⁰This *Rowena* is the second boat by that name to operate on the Missouri River. She remained under the ownership of Capt. John T. Dozier until Mar. 24, 1862, and was named for his daughter. Lytle and Holdcamper, *Merchant Steam Vessels*; Way, *Packet Directory*; Master Abstracts of Enrollments Issued at St. Louis, Missouri, 1846-1870, from microfilm, RG 41, Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

¹¹The steamer *Omaha City* was a 143.9-ton sidewheel boat built in 1857. Her first home port was Omaha. Brotherton and Murrey were the apparent owners when David Keiser was her master on a regular run between St. Louis and Glasgow. St. Louis Enrollments.

¹²The *Gerard B. Allen* was built in 1866 at Metropolis, Illinois, and completed at St. Louis. St. Louis enrollments list her as the *G. B. Allen* with J. P. Keiser listed as first master and

owner. She was reported burned on Mar. 29, 1869.

¹³Built in 1857 the sidewheel steamer *Sioux City* ended her ten-year career on the Missouri on Feb. 26, 1867, when she was destroyed by ice at St. Louis. C. K. or Chas. K. Baker appears as her owner in the enrollments throughout her career. Way, *Packet Directory*; Lytle and Holdcamper, *Merchant Steam Vessels*; St. Louis Enrollments.

Charles K. Baker, Sr., was a member of a large family of Missouri River pilots and owners with the surname of Baker. He died Apr. 10, 1891, in Kansas City and was buried like many other rivermen in the Bellefontaine Cemetery in St. Louis. [Way, *Packet Directory*; Albert R. Greene, "The Kansas River - Its Navigation," *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1905-1906*, 9 (1906)].

¹⁴The *Nellie Rogers* is known to have made mountain trips in 1863, 1864, 1866, and in 1868. The boat was dismantled in the spring of 1872 and the hull used as a barge.

¹⁵The stern wheel steamer *St. Johns* was built in 1864. On her 1869 trip to the mountains she did not make it all the way to Fort Benton. William J. Petersen, "The Log of the Henry M. Shreve to Fort Benton in 1869," 31 (*The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, (Mar. 1945): 579 indicates that in 1869 the *Huntsville* was commanded by R. L. Woolfolk. The *Huntsville* was on the upper Missouri that year, and the meeting between the *St. Johns* and the *Huntsville* probably took place about May 26 or 27.

¹⁶The *Hattie May* was a small sidewheel

steamer of 230 tons built in 1864. She was lost Jan. 12 or 13, 1866, by ice at St. Louis. Since the boat had such a short life, the wood yard incident either took place in 1865 or Keiser was on some other boat in 1867.

The big oxbow bend referred to here is probably the one just above Sioux City, beginning where the Big Sioux River flowed into the Missouri. In 1869 this oxbow, called Logans Bend, was only 1/4 mile across the neck. Petersen, "The Log of the Henry M. Shreve."

¹⁷Fort Assiniboine was a temporary fur trading post, 1834-35, some distance above Fort Union, according to Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West II* (Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954 reprint edition), 961.

¹⁸Joseph Ramsey (Jose Ramuso or Ramisie) had been a hunter at Fort Union, beginning in the 1840s. He was of Mexican or Spanish ancestry. See "The Fort Benton Journal 1854-1856 and the Fort Sarpy Journal, 1855-1856," 225, in *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, X (Helena: 1940), 294.

¹⁹"Fort Mussle shell" was a trading post operated by the Montana Hide and Fur Company and a prospective townsite. Accounts of the battle with Indians appear in Peter Koch, "Life at Muscleshell in 1869 and 1870, written in 1884," and in James H. Bradley, "Accounts of Attempts to Build a Town at the Mouth of the Musselshell River," both in *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana II* (Helena: 1896).

²⁰No jokes were found with the manuscript letter.