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## Riverboats

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steamboats, in turn, carried the freight and passengers to destinations on the frontier where railroads did not yet exist. Eventually, the railroads reached those outlying areas as well, thus eliminating the steamboat as a profitable means of transportation. However short the period, the steamboats and the men that operated them provided transportation and supplies to those who settled and helped tame the Upper Missouri River area, and made Yankton the focal point of the frontier concerning the Upper Missouri River Area.

**THE STORY OF YANKTON AND HER** steamboats is a rich history that involves many newcomers to the region: Familiar names such as Gens. Hancock, Custer (bvt.) and Sheridan would pass through this area.

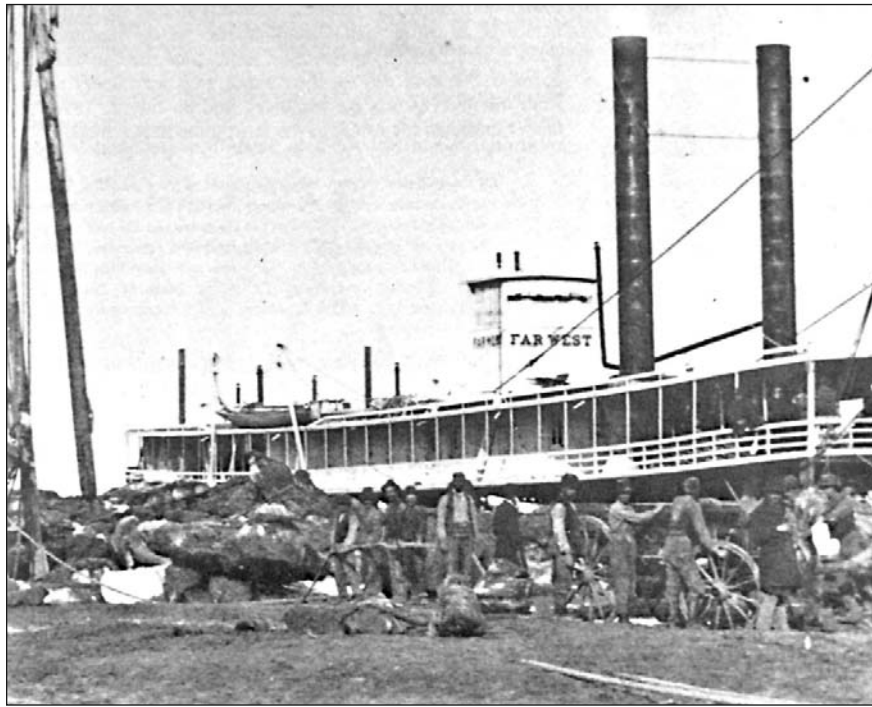
This is a significant chapter in the history of Dakota, in which Commodore Sanford B. Coulson and the men who made up the Missouri Transportation Line played an important part.

Coulson and his older brothers, along with other investors, created a steamboat company that would become the largest on the river and made its headquarters in Yankton, Dakota Territory in the 1870s. They operated on the Mississippi when the Missouri froze over. Showing great profits and building more boats, they later expanded their operations on the Missouri and opened offices in Fort Benton as well as Bismarck. The Missouri Transportation Line began a prosperous trade on the Upper Missouri in 1872; however, by 1890, the line ceased to exist, its prosperity severely affected by railroad expansion and fierce competition from other steamboat lines.

Coulson grew up in a steam boating family and served the Union during the Civil War. By 1870, he was the captain of the brand new steamboat, the *Far West*, of which he helped design. Commodore Coulson, as he would come to be known, was known for his ability to not only captain but also pilot steamboats. He brought the *Far West* up the Missouri and ran her out of Sioux City on her maiden voyage to this area in 1870 — the worst year on the river that anyone could remember — yet he operated her independently for the entire season without any issues. Coulson made a substantial profit and had avoided the many hazards that claimed hundreds of boats on the Missouri. Between Yankton and Sioux City there are close to a dozen boats that fell victim to the unpredictability of the Missouri, including the *North Alabama* making a run to supply Ft. Randall late in the season — a run that Coulson, commanding the *Far West*, turned down, as did Grant Marsh. Sioux City at this time was the end of the line for the railroads and thus served as the terminus for all government and civilian supplies. Coulson and his brothers, along with Grant Marsh, also had passed the Yankton area and saw that this little town offered a natural protected levee from the northwest and was further north of one of the most treacherous parts of the Missouri above Sioux City.

The city fathers of Yankton had been trying to get the railroad to come to Yankton for close to a decade. The Yankton *Press and Dakotian* stated on April 23, 1873, in reference to the steamboat trade: "Upon the extension of the railroad to Yankton, this town practically occupies the place of Sioux City."

Finally the Dakota Southern became a reality. The Missouri River Transportation Company was created from interests of the now split Sioux City Northwest Transportation Company, the Coulson brothers, J.C. McVay and Marsh made up most of the



P&D ARCHIVE PHOTO

The legendary *Far West*, which raced into Montana in 1876 to pick up the remnants from the battles that included Gen. George Custer's disastrous defeat at the Little Big Horn. (From the book "Yankton: The Way It Was!" by Bob Karolevitz)

controlling interests, and Marsh went to Washington in an attempt to win the two large government contracts for the newly formed company. The U.S. government offered bids on transporting all of the necessary supplies for both the military forts and the Native American agencies on the upper Missouri. These were coveted contracts that would provide for numerous other subsidiary occupations as well as outlets for the local ranchers and farmers. Government contracts for shipping freight and supplies to the frontier forts and Indian agencies were very lucrative. A government contract guaranteed that the steamboat company or companies that received such an indenture would have ample business for the entire season. The companies vied for these contracts, which assured large profits for the lowest bidder.

**THE GOVERNMENT HAD SIGNED** numerous treaties with the Plains Indians and as a result of the treaties, promised to deliver supplies to the Indian agencies. A separate contract covered the shipment of military stores and troops to more than 21 posts along the Upper Missouri. The amounts to be delivered to the Indians in 1873 were staggering, as the *Press and Dakotian* reported: "Twenty-three million, one hundred and fifty pounds of beef; five million, five hundred and thirty thousand pounds of flour; one million, three hundred and eighty thousand pounds of bacon; add to this, 487,000 pounds of coffee; 990,000 pounds of sugar; 69,300 pounds of tobacco."

The U.S. Army took bids on local territorial items such as agricultural products, beef and pork, and items produced in Yankton, like flour. As a result, Yankton area farmers and businessmen benefited and influenced by the amount of flour in demand constructed the flourmill that still stands in historic downtown Yankton. Other items coming from the "states" were transported on the Dakota Southern railroad, which had a span of rails that ran directly parallel to First Street a few yards from the river levee. So Yankton was on track to replace Sioux City as the coveted government focal point for all military and agency trade. It was now the terminus of the railroad and courting the interests who were to create the largest steamboat line on the Missouri River.

The Coulsons had sent a lobbyist to Yankton to meet with the city fathers who agreed to pay for and build a warehouse at the levee stretching from Walnut to Douglas streets. The original minutes of the town meeting were still in the basement of City Hall (they have since disappeared). In

this instance, the secretary described the government's mandate that a warehouse must exist in the location of the deposit of government supplies and goods; without the warehouse, Yankton would forfeit both the incredibly large government business and also the Missouri River Transportation Line as both would then resort to using Sioux City as a port and supply depot. The page-long record of the meeting shows the immediacy of the situation and the consensus of the city leaders to work together with the Coulsons to construct the warehouse as soon as the materials could be obtained.

This settled, the Missouri Transportation Line, otherwise known as the "Coulson Line" or "Old Reliable," began its history in Yankton. The Coulson Packet Line began operating out of Yankton in 1873 with seven boats: the *Far West*, *Nellie Peck*, the *Western*, *Key West*, *E. H. Durfee*, the *Sioux City* and *Mary McDonald*. The new steamboat company took a risk by moving to the tiny town in Dakota Territory, but the prospects seemed bright as outlined in an article in the *Missouri Democrat*: "The commerce of the Missouri river for the next ten years, will be greater than has ever been known. Yankton will be the St. Paul of the Missouri."

**SO BEGAN THE HISTORY OF THE** largest and most famous of all the steamboat lines that plied the mighty Missouri River. The Coulson Line won many more government contracts, bringing more business to Yankton.

Many other steamers besides those of the Coulson Line docked here at Yankton, and many independent boats as well were contracted by the line to sail under the Coulson flag especially during the Indian campaigns of the mid to late 1870s. The Great Flood of 1881 and the ice gorge struck the steamers that had been pulled up on the ways for the winter and damaged many, but only two were destroyed outright, the *Western* and the *Fontenelle*. The rest were repaired and sailed again. Most of the Coulson Line boats were wintering on the island west of town that is today part of Lake Yankton. The news of the flood was vastly exaggerated, and the eastern press had done such a thorough job of retelling the disaster that Coulson's Insurance Company sent him telegrams asking as to why he had not yet collected on this losses!

The 1873 military campaign brought more troops to the frontier in order to augment the cavalry and infantry effort to sustain the surveying for the Northern Pacific Railroads attempt to stretch across the

Missouri river from Edwinton (Bismarck) into the hunting grounds and unceded territory of the Lakota.

Lt. Col. George Custer had come north with parts of the 7th Cavalry via Yankton and the Dakota Southern to take command the commissioned fort named after the slain 16th president. What would become known as the Expedition of 1873 brought increased activity to Yankton and Ft. Randall as steamboats were ordered into government service while in transit, unloading their shocked and surprised civilian cargoes where ever the telegraph could reach to load military stores and armor the pilot houses now being chartered into government service.

Telegrams survive that show that Commodore S.B. Coulson and Capt. J.C. McVay were extremely busy shifting boats and captains into the government service and receiving an average of \$350 per day per boat extra over the contracted rates.

The campaign of 1876 found Marsh making the heroic trip turning the *Far West* around at night on the Little Big Horn River and making the arduous record trip conveying not only the wounded from the Reno and Benteen's command, but the news to a stunned nation in the midst of celebrating America's centennial that Custer's immediate command had been wiped out to the last man.

These campaigns — along with the government contracts combined with the gold rush to the Black Hills — brought huge profits to the line as well as more people to the area. The only way to go was to travel with the "Old Reliable" as far as Ft. Pierre and then go overland to strike it rich. The city fathers of Deadwood crafted a letter to Commodore Coulson in an attempt to set up a permanent line of transportation from Yankton to Deadwood, which they did also involving Dr. Walter Burleigh. The *Rosebud*, captained by Mart Coulson, would pick up miners gone broke at the Fort Pierre landing and bring them as far as Yankton for no fee. (Interesting to note that gold was discovered by Custer in 1874, but the citizens of Yankton had been lobbying Congress for an expedition into the Black Hills to locate the rumored gold since 1862.)

In 1879 the Coulson Line advertised the following steamers "plying between" Yankton and Ft. Benton, Montana Territory: *Montana*, *Rosebud*, *Big Horn*, *Dacotah*, *Key West*, *Josephine*, *Far West* (with a new upper deck), the *Western* and the *Black Hills*.

In order to compete with the ever-increasing pressure of the railroad, the company had designed and built three huge boats for the upper Missouri trade. These three boats would have appeared to be at home on the Mississippi as they dwarfed all other boats on the Missouri. The *Montana* and *Dacotah* were completed for the 1879 season and the *Wyoming* would begin her voyage from Pennsylvania the next spring. The *Montana*, when empty, drew two feet aft and 16 inches forward. She could haul freight and passengers, 1,200 tons overall.

The Coulson brothers, McVay, Todd and Evans all had input into the design of the three big boats. On April 29, something truly exciting occurred and the entire town of Yankton turned out at the levee to witness an extraordinary sight as the new *Montana* made her way to the levee. The *Press and Dakotian* reported: "The pride of the Coulson Line (and as a natural sequence of Yankton also which is the home of the owners of the Coulson boats,) the big steamer *Montana* arrives."

They were designed with two purposes in mind: the ability to transport a



Marsh



Coulson

vast amount of freight and to appeal to the passengers who were emigrating or traveling to Montana. "It is the aim of the Coulson Line to furnish two boats which shall be models of luxury and at the same time possess abundant freight carrying capacity without a depth of hole that will retard progress," according to the *Press and Dakotian*.

**THE CLOSE OF THE 1879 SEASON** was indeed the end of an era. The Missouri Transportation Line would never again succeed in winning the government contract as the railroad had reached several points beyond Yankton. In the fall of 1879, the Milwaukee Road had reached Chamberlain, D.T., and by 1880, the Chicago Northwestern stretched all the way to Pierre. The railroad had bypassed Yankton and the government would ship freight as far as the lines ran. The Missouri River Transportation Line did not leave Yankton, as it had offices in Bismarck and Fort Benton, but the effects were felt in Yankton. The only area left yet untouched by the rail was the area above Bismarck.

The competition between the lines continued. In 1880-81 the contract went to the Peck Line of Sioux City. As a result of the reduction in business, the Missouri River Transportation Company began selling off part of their fleet. The *Press and Dakotian* announced that the *Far West*, built by the Coulson Line 10 years before, had been sold to the Peck Line for \$6,000. Coulson continued to sell steamers, and eventually the *Far West*, *Black Hills* and *Key West* were all purchased by the Power Line.

By 1885 the Missouri River Transportation Company closed its offices in Bismarck, leaving the Power Line as the last major Upper River steamboat line.

As for the boats, the *Big Horn* had been rebuilt in Yankton in 1882. In 1883 she hit a snag and sank within five minutes. The passengers were all safe, but the \$20,000 worth of cargo was destroyed and only insured for \$5,000! This disastrous episode proved to be more catastrophic for the line than the 1881 flood and the loss of a completely stripped *Western*. On June 19, 1884, Coulson wrote in the margin of a newspaper that he had sold his stock in the *Dacotah* and that "... she is at St. Louis now." The Missouri River Transportation Company sold the *Rosebud* to the Power Line, and she made her first run for the Block P in May 1885. The *Josephine* was sold to the government in 1885 and converted into a snagging boat, only to come back to Yankton a few years later, purchased by Joseph Leach Sr. of Running Water, where she was used as an excursion boat until declared unfit for service in 1907.

And so the story of Yankton's steamboat history ended not by the flood of 1881, but by another type of technology that did not have to stop during five months of the year but could operate for the most part year-round. The individuals who started the Missouri River Transportation Company were heavily involved in the community and also branched out into many different businesses. These same men started the first bank in Yankton, what would become the First Dakota National Bank, which they also used this as the operational headquarters for the Missouri River Transportation Company. They were hard-working, civic-minded individuals who, with their families, made a commitment to the city, state and nation. They helped build a town that grew into a city and a territory that became a state. While this is only a small part of a much larger story, it is a story that needs to be repeated and shared with the next generation.

See you at Riverboat Days!



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