
Friends of the Pecatonica River Foundation

Mar. 21, 2013

History

Early Steamboats On Pecatonica River Part 9 of 15

BOATING ON THE PECATONICA RIVER

In the early years of our county the Pecatonica River was navigated at times in an effort to secure better transportation to market. In 1836, Lewis M. Grigsby, helped bring a boat load of lead weighing 100,000 lbs. down the river for Col. Wm. Hamilton from his diggings at Wyota, Wisconsin. In the 1840's he rafted lumber down the river. Johnson's 1854 history pokes fun at Ransomburg's steamboat pictures on the maps, but mentioned steamboats operating, but gave no details. However 1854 was the first year of cord wood cutting industry along the river bottoms in Harlem and Waddams Township to supply railroad locomotives with fuel and firewood for rapidly growing Freeport. Tradition has always stated that much of this wood was hauled to Freeport on barges towed by small river steamboats. The river was much wider and carried more water, which was less muddy. The marshland acted as a filter and like a sponge released the water slowly during the summer, making it more navigable. Also in 1847 the dam was built at Freeport, providing a wide, deep channel for boats. A dam was maintained at the old Goddard Mill site until it finally washed out in April 1932 ending most of the boating.

In July 1853 John Bradford, Sr. of Winslow built a steamboat named the "William S. Russell." It was eighty feet long, twenty-four feet beam, 3 ½ feet in the hold, drew fourteen inches of water light and was rated at thirty tons. Its builder, John Bradford, Sr., an early settler at Winslow, was captain, John Bradford, Jr., was mate; C. Howard was clerk; James Horder and R. M. Mack were engineers, while William Cox was pilot. It made its first trip in July 1858 carrying 104 people on its maiden voyage from Freeport to Winslow. The newspaper was pleased with its success, but apparently Capt. Bradford was not as he sold the machinery elsewhere after three years. Fisher's Mill Dam was built above McConnell by 1870 ending such a route from Winslow to Freeport. A boat should have prospered with all the business from such a large area, but the river just didn't have enough water to make the operation of this type of boat a profitable venture.

The Bulletin reported on Sept. 1, 1859, that one, Mr. Wilmott of Pecatonica, proposes to carry passengers to the State Fair to be held that year in Freeport for 20 cents each on his steamer. A trial trip was to be run before hand. This is a puzzle in view of the fact that brown's Mill Dam was already in use by then. In the 1860's J. Walter Linderman operated a steamboat as far as McConnell to tow barges loaded with cordwood to Freeport. In 1968 he was listed as a dealer in firewood. It was a two-day trip and the crew stayed over night at McConnell. The search of newspapers fails to uncover another boat article until 1882 when Ausust Seitz was reported having a steam tug built in Milwaukee, which he would assemble at Freeport to use to tow wood barges on the river to Freeport. It cost \$2,200. Leslie Fargher remembers seeing such a tug on the river while fishing in the 1880's. Locomotives no longer used cordwood as fuel, but most homes were still heated by wood in Freeport. One presumes that the earlier boats used in this service wore out by this time.

Continued.