

This map with its novel view of the Kansas rivers is from an illustration in an 1857 pamphlet promoting a connecting-up of water routes from Norfolk, Va., "far into Kansas, and eventually to the very bases of the Rocky Mountains." After the Civil War Kansans successfully used flat boats on the Arkansas river to carry their products to market, and later, steamboats made runs up and down the river. But Kansas' dream of a seaport faded with the coming of the railroad and the government's refusal to appropriate money to make the river safe and deep enough for navigation.

NAVIGATION ON THE ARKANSAS RIVER, 1719-1886

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THE ARKANSAS river is one of the three principal waterways which drains the area lying between the Rocky mountains and the Mississippi river—roughly one third of the continental United States. The section of the river which lies between the “Three Forks” area (where the Verdigris and Grand rivers join with the Arkansas) and the present-day state of Kansas was an important and oft-traveled link in the transportation systems of the natives of the region, of the French traders and trappers which visited the area in the 18th century, and of the people of the United States after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

There are, of course, no records of navigation of the Arkansas by natives before the coming of white men to the area; however, there are indications which suggest such use. In 1719 Bernard de La Harpe, a French trader in the service of the Mississippi Company, a joint stock company which had received a monopoly for all trade in the colony of Louisiana, visited the region of present-day Oklahoma to establish trading posts and friendly relations among the Indians. During this journey La Harpe met with a number of the Indian tribes who lived along the Arkansas and Canadian rivers, including the Wichitan groups who lived near the location of present-day Muskogee, Okla. While with these Indians, La Harpe inquired as to the navigability of the Arkansas river. He was told that the river was navigable by canoe as far as Spanish territory (this would have been part of the Spanish province of New Mexico which is present-day Colorado). This suggests that the natives had personal knowledge of the river which had been attained by navigation of the stream.¹

Two years after his first visit to the area along the Arkansas, La Harpe was back. This time he had been ordered by the council of Louisiana to explore the Arkansas river and evaluate its commercial worth. In his report he wrote: “I

have no doubt that it will carry a canoe to the habitations of the Padoucas and of the Spanish of New Mexico. . . .”² Also, La Harpe urged that a post be established on the Arkansas to control the Indian trade.³

Twenty years after La Harpe’s visits to the Arkansas, French traders began to ascend the river, poling up the stream in their small boats to the “Great Bend” in the river above present-day Wichita to trade with the Wichita Indians who lived on the river. Also, the river was utilized as a highway to New Mexico. Since the founding of French Louisiana in the latter part of the 17th century, Frenchmen had dreamed of reaching the Spanish outpost of Santa Fe. There they could trade their goods for high profits because of the isolated position of the city. However, Spanish policy had prevented trade in the colonies with foreigners. This effectively prevented usage of the most direct route to New Mexico—the Red river. However, in 1739 the Mallet brothers—Jean and Paul—crossed overland from the Missouri country, reaching Santa Fe. Part of their party returned by way of the Arkansas, marching overland to the river about the great bend, and then descending the stream to the Mississippi.⁴

After the early ventures up the Arkansas, Frenchmen began to frequent the river yearly. Trade was sufficient to necessitate a post on the upper portion of the stream. Fort Ferdinandina was erected near the mouth of present-day Deer creek (south of the town of Newkirk, Okla.) at the site of a Wichita Indian village. Very little is known concerning this post, including the exact date of its establishment; however, its existence indicates frequent use of the river. Louisiana was ceded to Spain from France in 1762 as part of the settlement which ended the Seven Years War. However, Spain did not take control of the colony until 1768,

2. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 81; see, also, Pierre Margry, *Exploration des Affluents du Mississippi et découverte des montagnes rocheuses, 1679-1754* (Paris, Imprimerie Jouaust Et Sigaux, 1886), pp. 370 ff.

3. Lewis, *Along the Arkansas*, pp. 97-100.

4. Margry, *Explorations*, pp. 453-465.

1. See Elizabeth Ann Harper, “The Taovayas in Frontier Trade and Diplomacy,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Oklahoma City, v. 31, no. 3 (Autumn, 1953), p. 274; Anna Lewis, *Along the Arkansas* (Dallas, The Southwestern Press, 1932), pp. 62 ff.

and then only at New Orleans. Spanish officials never exercised control over the interior of the colony, allowing the Frenchmen to continue as they had under the rule of their country. Thus it is probable that the trade on the Arkansas continued unabated.⁵

Spanish rule in Louisiana ended in 1800 when Napoleon forced the king of Spain, Carlos IV, to retrocede the colony to France by the Treaty of San Ildefonso. Napoleon dreamed of reestablishing the French in North America. However, by 1803 problems with black revolutionaries in the Caribbean and with England in Europe caused him to sell the colony to the United States. Louisiana was purchased for 15 million dollars, but Napoleon would not or could not define what he had sold. The boundaries of Louisiana had never been clearly set. Thus Pres. Thomas Jefferson sent explorers to inspect the country—and, hopefully, to obtain information which would allow boundaries to be drawn for Louisiana. Among the explorers were Meriweather Lewis and William Clark, William Dunbar, and Thomas Freeman. Despite the successes of Lewis and Clark on the Missouri, the region along the Red and Arkansas rivers remained vague because Spanish officials prevented exploration of the area by Americans, fearing aggression by the United States. Thus in 1806 Zebulon M. Pike was sent to explore the Arkansas and Red rivers, locating the source of both streams. Pike set out on his mission from Saint Louis in July, 1806, ascending the Missouri river. After visiting several Indian villages on the Osage and Republican rivers, Pike turned southward, arriving at the Arkansas near the location of present-day Larned in mid-October. At the Arkansas, Pike decided to send Lt. James Wilkinson down the stream to report the progress of the expedition.⁶

Wilkinson departed on October 28, 1806, accompanied by four soldiers and one Osage Indian. The party traveled in two newly constructed canoes made of green cottonwood and buffalo skins, carrying provision for 21 days. However, progress was slowed by low water because they were traveling during a dry period of the year. Nonetheless, the journey

was made to the mouth of the Verdigris in two months. The party arrived at the trading posts at the "Three Forks" on December 29, 1806, and obtained supplies for the final leg of the journey to the Mississippi. Of course, Zebulon Pike continued his march overland to the Rocky mountains, giving one peak his name, and was arrested by Spanish officials, spending several months as the prisoner of the Spaniards. His involvement—if indeed he was involved—with Aaron Burr and Gen. James Wilkinson, the father of Pike's companion, has never been fully clarified.⁷

Regardless of Pike's cupidity, he was interested in the navigability of the Arkansas. On November 16, 1806, while Wilkinson and his five companions were descending the lower course of the river, Pike wrote:

The Arkansas appeared at this place [near the mouth of the Purgatory river, a tributary of the Arkansas] to be much more navigable than below, where we first struck it; and from any impediment I have yet discovered in the river I would not hesitate to embark in February at its mouth and ascend to the Mexican (Rocky) mountains with crafts properly constructed.⁸

No doubt the reason for Pike's statement that the river appeared "to be much more navigable than below," was because the river bed had changed radically in the mountains. Whereas it had been broad and winding on the prairies, it had become narrower and deeper in the mountains, leading him to believe that a boat could avoid grounding easier in the upper section. Of course, the river did not have more water in the mountains, it simply appeared as such to Pike.

Several years after his visit to the upper Arkansas, Pike's confidence in the river's ability to support vessels on its waters was rewarded. During May, 1809, the United States government secured the aid of the noted fur trapper, Ezekiel Williams, in returning the Mandan chief, Shahaka, to his home lands on the upper Missouri. Shahaka had been convinced by Lewis and Clark to visit the national capital in Washington, D. C. During the visit, war broke out between the Mandans and the Dakotas. Thus it was imperative that the chief be escorted to his home by a force large enough

5. See George Shirk, "Real Estate Deal No. 1," *Oklahoma City Sunday Oklahoman*, August 27, 1950.

6. See Elliott Coues, ed., *The Expedition of Zebulon Montgomery Pike* (Francis P. Harper, 1895), v. 2, *passim*.

7. *Ibid.*, v. 2, pp. 539-557.

8. Milo Milton Quafe, ed., *The Southwestern Expedition of Zebulon M. Pike* (Chicago, R. R. Donnelley and Sons Company, 1925), pp. 71-72.

This flat boat in 1875 carried the first load of wheat down the Arkansas river. A newspaper account in 1878 said such a trip took one month from Arkansas City to Little Rock but was worthwhile when wheat selling in Kansas for 50 to 70 cents a bushel brought 90 cents in Arkansas. Flat boats continued to ply the river until the 1880's though steamboats began to come into use after 1878.



to protect him. This was accomplished without mishap.⁹

After delivering Shahaka safely home, the trapper and his companions decided to explore the country beyond the Missouri. For most of the party this was an unfortunate decision. Moving southward from the Missouri, in the spring of 1811, the party ran afoul of hostile natives, and all but three of the number were killed. However, Williams escaped, fleeing to the headwaters of the Arkansas, where he constructed a canoe of skins. Descending the river by night and hiding in the bushes along the river by day, Williams made good his escape. Indeed, he found the trip profitable—at least for a time—until he met a roving band of Kansa or Kaw Indians in present-day Kansas. Although the Indians were friendly to the trapper, and allowed him to join them in a raiding party against the Pawnees, the chief refused to return Williams's bundles of furs—which included 125 beaver skins.¹⁰

Continued use of the river is indicated by the efforts in 1843 by Ceran St. Vrain to ship furs from the Rockies down the Arkansas. The experiment did not work well. Near the mouth of Walnut creek in present-day Kansas the boats were abandoned because of low water. This problem was the result of the journey taking place in early summer when the river was annually low before the June rise.¹¹

9. LeRoy R. Hafén, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West* (Glendale, Cal., The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1965), v. 9, pp. 393-409.

10. *Ibid.*; see, also, Clarence A. Vandiveer, *The Fur-Trade and Early Western Exploration* (Cleveland, The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1929), pp. 166-167.

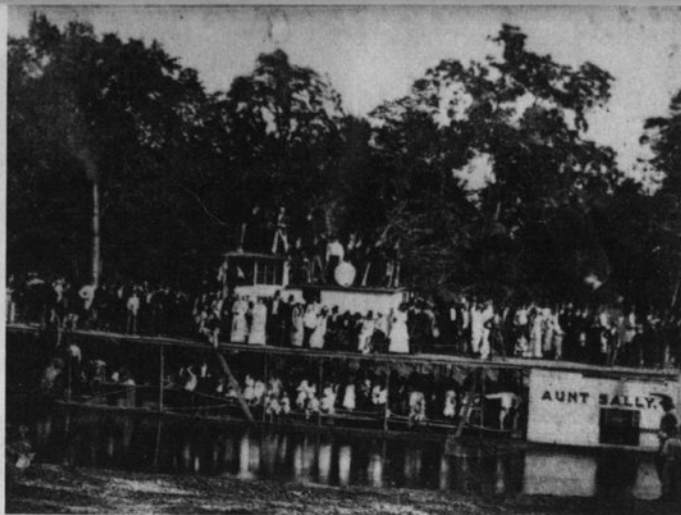
11. Hafén, *The Mountain Men*, v. 2, pp. 43-44.

Despite the repeated journeys on the Arkansas before 1865, the most concerted efforts to reap the benefits of the river's navigability came after the Civil War when the settlement of Kansas had been made. Kansas became a state in 1861, and many settlers—mostly farmers—entered the state during the decade following the end of the conflict. The lands in Kansas were fertile, and huge harvests of wheat and corn were produced. However, the farmers of Kansas were plagued by inadequate facilities for taking their products to markets. The results were low prices for goods produced by the farmers in Kansas, and the initiation of efforts to use the Arkansas river to carry products to market. The Arkansas was located in the midst of the farming country, and it flowed into the Indian territory, where foodstuffs could be sold to the Indian agencies, and into the state of Arkansas, where produce could be sold to merchants and buyers from the more populous areas of the nation.¹²

The first efforts to utilize the river were made in flat boats and keel boats. In November, 1872, three men embarked from Wichita on the Arkansas bound for New Orleans.¹³ Undoubtedly their journey was a success because flat boats began to ply the waters of the Arkansas steadily. On March 22, 1876, a party was planning to set out from Arkansas City for Little Rock with a boat loaded with corn and potatoes, and in June the Arkansas City *Traveler* noted that, "S. C. Winton and M. A. Felton are

12. *First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture for the Years 1877-1878* (Topeka, Kansas State Board of Agriculture, 1878), pp. 159-161.

13. *Wichita Eagle*, November 14, 1872.



Owners of the *Aunt Sally*, a small swamp-tug designed to transverse the bayous of Arkansas, brought their steamer to Arkansas City and made several excursion trips up and down the Arkansas river during the summer of 1878. This beginning of steamboating on the upper Arkansas gladdened the hearts of Arkansas Citizens who advised Wichita, El Dorado, and Winfield that they need not try to compete with their seaport city.

about to build a flat boat, and load it with corn for the Little Rock market. Mr. Wintin made one trip before with flour, and thinks corn will pay."¹⁴

In July, 1876, another method was tried on the river—a sail boat. William Fowler built a sail boat 16 feet long, and left Arkansas City for Little Rock. The *Traveler* described the scheme of the craft as having a large sail and "a wheel on each side, to turn with a crank, while sitting on the front seat facing the bow, and an attachment made to the rudder so as to steer with his feet. . . ." ¹⁵ In September of the same year Charles McIntire and Will Leonard left Arkansas City in a small boat which was covered with oil cloth and equipped with a portable stove, allowing them to cook aboard the craft during the voyage to New Orleans.¹⁶ Evidently, traffic was heavier on the Arkansas than can be documented from existing records because the Oxford *Independent* asked on August 16, 1876, "Flat boats leave Arkansas City almost every week, loaded with flour for the Indian Agencies and Fort Smith. Why can't some of our businessmen turn their attention to the Southern markets?" ¹⁷ Despite this slap at the businessmen of Oxford, the town also prof-

ited from its location on the Arkansas river. The *Independent* noted on June 21, 1877, that, "The boat which left Wichita last week, loaded with lumber and machinery for Wellington, arrived at the wharf in Oxford in good shape. . . ." ¹⁸

The traffic did not slacken in 1877. In May, Thomas Baird and four other men attempted to bring three rafts of lumber down the stream from Wichita to Arkansas City. Although two of the rafts were broken by water-logged timbers and the swift current, one was brought safely to its destination.¹⁹ In June the *Traveler* noted that: "Tom and Jake Haney and Hallett, with their wives, started on a journey to Arkansas in a small boat last week. They were making twelve miles an hour when last seen." In July a larger boat, 35 feet long, was at Arkansas City, headed for Fort Smith.²⁰

On August 22, 1877, the *Traveler* reported two events on the river: "Three men stole Charles Gallert's boat and went down the Arkansas river." and "Another boat from Hutchinson is making a trip down the Arkansas. It was anchored at the bridge last Sunday." ²¹ The final listing for a flat boat in 1877 was on December 12, when Capt. Peter Myers and J.

14. Arkansas City *Traveler*, March 22, June 28, 1876.

15. *Ibid.*, July 5, 1876.

16. *Ibid.*, September 27, 1876.

17. Oxford *Independent*, August 16, 1876.

18. *Ibid.*, June 21, 1877.

19. Arkansas City *Traveler*, May 30, 1877.

20. *Ibid.*, June 6, July 4, 1877.

21. *Ibid.*, August 22, 1877.

Reed left the town for the Pawnee Indian agency in the Indian territory loaded with a cargo of corn.²²

In August, 1878, the *Traveler* published the experiences of the men who had taken a flat boat loaded with wheat to Little Rock. The trip took almost one month, beginning at Arkansas City on July 16 and ending at Little Rock on August 12. Evidently the journey was worthwhile for the men wrote that they had been offered 90 cents a bushel for their cargo at Fort Smith. Prices in Kansas ranged from 50 to 70 cents a bushel. They noted that the harvests of the area around Little Rock were poor because the wheat was "all damaged by the heavy rains, and is badly shriveled."²³ Flat boats continued to ply the waters of the river until the 1880's, but they were overshadowed in 1878 by a newcomer—the steamboat.

After the early successes on the Arkansas by flat boats, a group of businessmen in Arkansas City formed a joint stock company and purchased a small steamboat in Ohio, planning to bring the craft to Kansas by water; however, the boat was found to be insufficiently powerful to push up the current of the Arkansas, and when it failed to reach Fort Gibson, it was returned to Little Rock and sold.²⁴ The people of Kansas were dismayed but not deterred by this. In the summer of 1878, W. H. Speer and Amos Walton equipped a small ferry boat with a 10 horsepower engine taken from a threshing machine. This boat was successfully navigated up and down the river from Arkansas City for more than 60 miles. The boat was 16 feet wide and drew 10 inches of water.²⁵

This was the beginning of steamboating on the upper Arkansas. While the little ferry boat was visiting the cities along the river, I. H. Bonsall of Arkansas City convinced the owners of the small swamp-tug *Aunt Sally* to bring their steamer to Arkansas City, surveying the river for further steamboat traffic. The *Aunt Sally* had been designed to transverse the bayous of Arkansas, and was not suited to push through the swift current of the Arkansas river. However, the trip was made without mishap, the steamer arriving at Arkansas City on June

30, 1878. The *Traveler* was led by this occurrence to advise the nearby towns of Wichita, El Dorado, and Winfield to, "Sneak into your holes, you insignificant, twingling, inland towns, and never dare to stand in the broad, effulgent rays sent forth by a seaport city." The *Aunt Sally* was owned by Captains Barker and Lewis of Little Rock and it measured 85 feet in length, and 18 feet in width, drawing 12 inches without cargo and 18 loaded. Its registered capacity was 65 tons. The *Aunt Sally* made several excursion trips up and down the river before returning to Little Rock in the late summer. The people of Arkansas City were gladdened by the statement of its captains that a boat built for the purpose could make the trip between Arkansas and Kansas any day of the year.²⁶

Soon after the *Aunt Sally* departed, another ferry boat fitted with a small engine made the journey down the river to Arkansas. Henry and Albert Pruden and O. J. Palmer carried a load of 700 bushels of wheat to Little Rock, realizing a good profit for their effort.²⁷

Also, in September, 1878, work was begun on a steamboat at Arkansas City by Cyrus Wilson and McCloskey Seymore. In November this boat, the *Cherokee*, was launched. It was the first steamboat to be constructed in Kansas. The hull of the *Cherokee* was 83 feet long and 16 feet wide, and was equipped with two 20-horsepower engines. She drew approximately eight inches of water without cargo and 16 inches loaded.²⁸

In January, 1879, the Arkansas City *Traveler*, as always interested in the river, noted that the *Cherokee* was waiting in the Arkansas for the ice to melt to begin its journey to Arkansas. It was to be loaded with 1,500 bushels of wheat. But before the trip to Little Rock was begun the boat was tested, making runs up and down the river. Finally, on February 11 the *Cherokee* left for Little Rock carrying 1,000 bushels of wheat. On May 28 the *Traveler* quoted the Fort Smith *New Era* that the *Cherokee* had unloaded her cargo in that city and was preparing to return up river. The *Traveler* on June 25 indicated that the boat was ex-

22. *Ibid.*, December 12, 1877.

23. *Ibid.*, August 21, 1878, "Another Cargo of Wheat Landed at Little Rock by Flat Boat."

24. *First Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture* (Kansas), p. 159.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 160; Arkansas City *Traveler*, July 3, 1878; Arkansas City *Republican*, December 6, 1884; Wichita *Eagle*, July 4, August 1, 22, 1878.

27. *First Biennial Report*, p. 160.

28. *Ibid.*; Arkansas City *Traveler*, September 18, October 24, 1878.

pected to reach Arkansas City in the near future.²⁹

Other boats soon reached Arkansas City. In March the steamer *None Such* left Little Rock for Kansas. On April 14 the steamer arrived at the Pawnee Agency in the Indian territory, and on May 7, 1879, the *Traveler* announced the arrival of the boat at Arkansas City. The *None Such* was partially owned by its captain, J. S. Cotton of Dardanelle, Ark., and was a shallow-draft boat, designed for the upper river. The captain of the *None Such* noted that he had met the *Cherokee* during his journey up the river.³⁰ Also, on May 7 the *Traveler* noted that the steamers *Fletcher*, *Big Rock*, and *Water Witch* were planning to visit the city. However, the *Fletcher* was turned back by low water on the lower section of the river. The movements of the other boats are not recorded.³¹

In the spring of 1880 another steamer was plying the waters of the Arkansas. The *Nece-dah* under the command of Captain Appleby made several trips up the Walnut creek but his business consisted, primarily, of excursion parties.³²

In 1885 the flour millers of Arkansas City purchased a steamboat for the purpose of carrying their product to market. Thus the *Kansas Millers* was brought to Arkansas City. The boat was constructed in St. Louis, and arrived in Kansas in July, 1885. It was 75 feet long, 15 feet wide, and weighed 21 tons. It was designed especially for the trade between Arkansas and Kansas. Original partners in this venture included C. H. Searing and a Mr. Mead, both millers. The boat was captained by T. S. Moorehead. The investors hoped to attract others by offering free rides on the steamer, and many people accepted the rides. However, no new investors were found.³³

On her first journey for profit, the *Kansas Millers* was plagued by high waters. She was to deliver 2,000 pounds of flour to the Kaw Indian Agency at Washunga, but the high, swift water prevented a landing at the designated place. The flour was finally unloaded downriver, and

the owners were forced to pay a Mr. Lessert to haul the goods to the agency by wagon. This prevented any profits from accruing to the owners. Because the railroads had pushed into Kansas by the mid-1880's, and had spread feeder lines to most of the important towns, interest in the river had declined.³⁴

The people of Kansas had for several years attempted to convince the government to remove snags and build jetties in the river, making it safe and deep enough for navigation. And the government had made surveys of the river above Fort Gibson in 1833, in 1870, and in 1886, as well as appropriating funds for the snag boat *Wichita* to work in the stream. The *Wichita* worked in the river making one journey to Kansas in the winter of 1881-1882. However, the project was considered too expensive, and work ended in the 1880's.³⁵

The corps of engineers has continually asserted in the report of the chief engineer of the army that Fort Gibson, on the Grand river, two miles above its mouth, was the head of steamboat navigation because that was the extent of the corps' work on the river. The statement did not mean that steamboats could not proceed past Fort Gibson.³⁶

In 1909 Col. W. H. Bixby, chief engineer of the St. Louis division of the corps, wrote that "if there has ever been any commercial navigation of any sort above that point [the mouth of the Grand river] this office has no information of it. . . ." Surely Colonel Bixby would have been amazed to learn the extent and frequency of the trade which he believed nonexistent. In the spring of 1886 the last recorded steamboat voyage took place. The *Kansas Millers*, now captained by E. S. Bliss, descended the Arkansas from Arkansas City to Fort Smith and Little Rock. On its bow was 30,000 pounds of wheat, and three spike-

34. Topeka *Daily Capital*, July 13, 1952; *Arkansas City Traveler*, July 29, August 19, 1885; *Wichita Sunday Eagle-Beacon*, June 10, 1962.

35. Francis J. Kearful, *River Bed Cases; Memorandum as to the Navigability of the Arkansas River Above the Mouth of the Grand River* (n. p., n. d.), pp. 30 ff; *Annual Report of the Chief Engineer of the Army for 1870* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1871), and for 1884 and 1886; for a listing of all work done on the Arkansas river by the corps of engineers, see "Report of Maj. Graham D. Fitch, Corps of Engineers, Officer in Charge, for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1904, With Other Documents Relating to the Works," in *Report of the Chief Engineer of the Army for 1904* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1905), pp. 2095-2099.

36. *Ibid.*; also, see *Report of Chief Engineer of the Army*, each year, 1872-1909.

37. *Annual Report of the Chief Engineer of the Army for 1909* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1910), p. 8; see, also, Kearful, *River Bed Cases*, p. 57.

29. *Ibid.*, December 25, 1878, January 29, February 12, March 26, May 28, 1879.

30. *Cowley County Telegram*, Winfield, May 7, 1879; *Arkansas City Traveler*, May 7, 1879.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Cowley County Telegram*, March 31, 1880.

33. *Arkansas City Republican*, June 13, 20, July 4, 11, 18, 1885; *Cowley County Telegram*, July 9, 16, August 13, 1885; *Arkansas City Traveler*, July 22, 1885.

shaped barges were pushed in front of the boat, each carrying 30,000 pounds of wheat. The *Millers* was constantly bothered by running aground on sand bars on this journey.³⁸

38. Topeka *Daily Capital*, July 13, 1952; Wichita *Sunday Eagle-Beacon*, June 10, 1962.

The people of Kansas soon forgot the dreams of having a seaport in their midst. The failure of the Corps of Engineers to clear the river of obstructions and to build jetties, and the coming of the railroads had prevented the continuance of steamboating on the upper Arkansas.