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RECOLLECTIONS OF
A PIONEER STEAMBOAT PILOT,
— CONTRIBUTING TO —
THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE MISSISSIPPI,



— RELATED BY —
GEORGE C. NICHOLS,
AN ANCIENT RIVER MARINER.

LA CROSSE WIS.,
TUCKER & COMPANY, PRINTERS.

1883.

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INTRODUCTION.

Kind friends have frequently requested the subject of these pages to place in book form a narrative of his early experiences as steamboat pilot upon the Mississippi river. In compliance with these solicitations, and also his own desire to possess in a permanent form those incidents and occurrences of early life whose remembrance particularly fascinate old age, leads him to offer this small volume to the public.

Though his own personality must, necessarily, appear throughout the whole narration, to give it the proper substantiality, the endeavor has been to make it as little obtrusive as possible. Much material has also been excluded which, though interesting enough to the class it pertains to, might prove dull and insipid to the general reader. As far as the chronology is concerned it has been attempted to make it as exact as the limited means of information in our possession would allow; and any discrepancies discovered must be charged, with all possible leniency, to the defectiveness of unaided memory.

With this preface the following narrative is offered to all who feel an interest in the gentleman it refers to, or are entertained in the perusal of a page of the early history of the grandest river that flows through our charming land.

THE EDITOR.

DEC 28 1950

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FAMILY HISTORY.

George C. Nichols, the subject of these pages, was born in Stark county, Ohio, January 28, 1824. His father, Jonathan Nichols, was married on the bank of the Susquehanna river, in Pennsylvania, from where he moved to Ohio, and, after having refused eighty acres of land, where Cincinnati now stands, for his team, he took a farm in Stark county, of that State.

When George was six years old his parents sold out their Ohio home and, with their children, moved to Pigeon Falls, Michigan, where they remained about four years, and then, hearing such favorable reports of the bountiful soil of Illinois, "Egypt," the family went to Henderson county, of this great wheat raising State, and settled at a point opposite Burlington, Iowa, about three miles from the Mississippi river.

But even this fertile region had its drawbacks, and the advantages of a rich soil and enormous productions were counterbalanced by the prevalence of agues and fevers, causing many a crop to waste for want of harvesters. Disgusted with such a climate, the family looked around for another place of settlement. After fruitless journeys up the Arkansas and Red rivers in quest of a favorable location, the family turned northward, in 1837, and settled at the head of navigation on the Grand river, Chariton county, Missouri.

Still, the wanderings of this family, consisting of parents and nine children, were not destined to cease. A twofold circumstance occurred to drive it into the unsettled wilderness of the great Northwest. A Mormon settlement was formed in the

immediate vicinity, and this unpleasant neighborhood, together with the death of the eldest daughter, induced them to sell out in the fall of 1839, and, without any definite place of final settlement in view, to journey up to Galena, Illinois, where the family were established for the winter.

The father was, yet in his best years, hale and vigorous, and, having made preparations for the building of a mill on Black river, Wisconsin, he made a voyage up that river in the spring, carrying his family and effects in pirogues. But George, the future pilot, remained behind at Galena, at about the same time his parents left, he started off for St. Louis in search of employment.

The family continued up the Black river, until one night they encamped close to a cataract whose roaring noise was heard in the stillness of the night, and in the morning Jonathan Nichols named the place "Roaring Creek," and selected the roaring falls for his millsite. Here was erected, in 1840, the second mill on Black river, about ten miles below Black River Falls. Finally the roaming life and unsuccessful settlements of this family had been exchanged for a quiet enjoyment of the productive soil and profitable forests of Wisconsin.

Their hospitable home was often the scene of social gatherings, managed in true frontier style. The youth of the neighborhood congregated here many an evening, and, while George's brother performed upon the violin, enjoyed all the pleasures of a country dance. Wm. T. Price and others of the elite of the vicinity frequently took part in these innocent pleasures. The elders, in the meantime, would recount to each other their various experiences and fortunes, interspersed with droll stories and more quiet pastimes.

Many are yet living who remember the Nichols family with pleasant recollections and affectionate thoughts for the hearty welcome and generous treatment extended alike to the stranger and neighbor; a bright and pure center in the midst of wild

scenes and a half barbarous civilization. Capt. Day, of the Warsaw, ferrying between La Crosse and La Crescent, visited the Blackriver country in the 40's, and recalls the home of Mr. Nichols as entirely true to the description we have given it.

The cholera epidemic, which raged through there in 1851, carried the father off from his earthy struggles, and the mother followed him to the last resting place ten years later. With two of their children they lie buried there in the family grave.

OUTLINE OF LATER EVENTS.

During the stay of the family at Quincy, young George took his first steamboat trip, as a common hand, on board a steamer bound for Lake Pepin and return. This trip was mostly undertaken with a view to see the country and to partly gratify the boy's enthusiasm for the river. For in the days of George Nichols' youthful ambition it was regarded as the highest achievement of mortal conception to be a steamboat pilot, with the exception, perhaps, of being a steamboat captain.

It was, therefore, but natural that, when he was left alone behind at Galena, the first impulse of his nature should lead him to seek the coveted position of pilot, and a journey to St. Louis in the spring of 1840 succeeded in installing him on the Ariel in that position. At the end of this season he went up to his parents' home on the Black river and remained with them for four years, occupied in running rafts from his father's mill.

In the spring of 1845 the now full-fledged pilot entered on the steamer Argo, running from Galena, Illinois, to Fort Snelling. He remained on her for two seasons, during which time she was engaged in the Fort Snelling trade. The following year she was sunk at Argo Island, near Winona, where a portion of the wreck can still be seen. On a return from Marine Mills, in the Prairie Bird, he came up with the Argo just in time to rescue her crew and save the cargo and machinery.

The Minnesota Packet Company was organized in 1846, and into its service the young pilot next entered. He was pilot on the Dr. Franklin during the seasons of 1847 and 1848, and

Captain Blakely, one of the pioneer steamboatmen of St. Paul, was then Clerk. In the latter of these two seasons Mr. Nichols assisted in moving the Winnebago Indians to a point on the Minnesota river, some fifty miles above St. Paul.

The following year the Senator, Captain Orrin Smith, was piloted by him to the falls of the St. Croix. Captain Smith was a very religious man and would allow no work to be done on Sunday. No matter where they might be, when midnight Saturday came, the anchor would be heaved and the vessel brought to until midnight Sunday. While in the employ of the Packet Company he piloted the Menomonee, in 1850, transient boats 1851, the Ben. Campbell in 1852, the Lady Franklin in 1853, and the Alhambra in 1854. The last named vessel was the first stern-wheel boat to ply the waters of the Upper Mississippi, and made regular trips out from St. Louis.

In the year 1855 Mr. Nichols received an offer of an exceeding large sum of money for his services from Captain Roberts, of the Greek Slave, and to accept it was obliged to pay a forfeit to the Minnesota Packet Company, the receipt of which payment he has still in his possession and to which we shall subsequently return. The Louis Robert here mentioned was one of the pioneer settlers upon the site now occupied by St. Paul, and may be said to have laid out the city. He left steamboating shortly after the time we speak of him, and began in the Indian trade at St. Paul. He died a few years ago as one of the city's leading men.

Galena, Illinois, had hitherto been Mr. Nichols' stopping place when on land, but in 1856 he moved to Dubuque, and came into the employ of J. P. Farley, who had, with a few others, just started a small packet company there, and piloted the Excelsior for them. We find him next on the Adelia, in 1857, and the Gray Eagle, Captain Smith Harris, in 1858; then piloting various transient and regular boats, winding up with the Fire Canoe, in 1863, until he was hired by the Davidson

Line the next year to run tow and passenger boats for them.

While in the employ of this company, he piloted the Jenny Baldwin, Captain Tom. Cushing, in 1864, and the steamers Keokuk, Annie Johnston and Addie Johnston, in 1865, with I. H. Moulton, now freight agent at La Crosse for the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Company, as Captain. In 1867 he was pilot on the Bill Henderson, Captain Bradley, and ran rafts during most of the season.

At the administrator's sale of the family farm, Mr. Nichols' bought it, hiring his brother to manage it for him. He was then the rich member of the family, and could boast of several other valuable pieces of property besides this farm of 600 acres. He moved now with his family to this place, where he made his home for ten years, until he sold out in 1866 and brought his family to Davenport to reside. While living at the farm he brought there the second piano that had ever been on the Black river, taking it with him from St. Louis.

The Diamond Jo Line next called Mr. Nichols into its service, in 1880, and during the four years he remained with it he held the wheel on the Arkansas, Captain Le Mot, and the Ida Fulton, Captain Michel. Charles Schneider was a worthy companion of Nichols during these years, and is remembered by him with considerable interest.

Upon leaving the Diamond Jo Line, Mr. Nichols went to work again for the Messrs. Davidson, as pilot on the G. H. Wilson, Captain N. Duncan, in 1875. During the early part of the season of 1876 he was occupied in taking boats over the upper rapids, at Davenport, an eighteen mile trip, and then went on the Victory, with the same captain as the previous year. In 1879 he held the wheel on the Alex. McGregor, pass from La Crosse to St. Louis. The next two years upon the Davidson boats, and steered the Belle of Bellevue in 1882. His

last trip was made the last season on the City of Alma, Captain Jacob Richtman, of Fountain City, running from Alma, Wis., to La Crosse.

The Captain was married at St. Paul in 1849, the year he took out his first license, and is the father of five children, a son, living at La Crosse, who follows his father's occupation as pilot, a daughter living at La Crescent, and three daughters in Davenport. The son, George S. Nichols, was pilot on the Weaver during the last season, but has now been engaged by the Davidson Line, and will make regular trips between St. Louis and St. Paul. The young man is a worthy successor of his father, and his entry into the employment of one of the chief lines, whose vessels ply the waters of the Mississippi, and upon whose decks his father had stood such honorable service, will herald a course which an ambitious man may look back upon with pride.

At length has been completed a chronicle to date of the eventful and ever varying career of a pioneer steamboat pilot. The following pages will be devoted to an account of such incidents and circumstances as by their particular interest lay claim to a more detailed narration.

EARLY DAYS ON THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI.

Fort Snelling was for two decennaries the great and, in fact, the only trading post in the Northwest. Commenced in 1818 and finished in 1824, it stood alone as the only civilized center in the midst of a great Indian territory, and within a few miles of the head of navigation on the Mississippi river. The first steamboat to reach the post was Victoria, in 1823; and the necessity of having provisions taken to the post would bring a boat up there only a few times every year, until 1845, when the Argo, piloted by Mr. Nichols, began to make regular trips to the fort.

Their stay during this and a few subsequent seasons would be brief, only sufficiently long for the vessel to discharge her cargo and reload with furs. Previous to this date the mail was carried up the river in a canoe by two men, requiring fifteen days for a round trip from Prairie du Chien to Fort Snelling. Now, of course, the steamer received the mail contract. But during the winter season a dog train was employed, except when the ice would hold a pony; at other times the mail had to be transported on the carrier's back. The river was then the only open way through this wild country, the banks for miles back being covered with dense brushes and heavy forests.

The whole country west of the Mississippi river was in the undisputed possession of the various Indian tribes as late as to the 40's, when a few straggling settlements began to appear. The opportunity for trading presented by these circumstances, giving the entire control of such an immense territory into the

hands of any company who chose to direct it from Fort Snelling, was very early perceived, and the Fur Company, consisting of H. H. Sibley, Joseph Rolette and H. L. Dousman, with John Jacob Astor, of New York, had charge of the Indian trade for the whole country above Lake Pepin, extending to the British Possessions on the north, and on the west to the tributaries of the Missouri river. The company's headquarters was at Mendota, a small trading post at the mouth of the Minnesota river, under the protecting guns of Fort Snelling, whither Gen. Sibley came in 1834.

The Winnebago, Sioux and Chippewa Indians were the three principal tribes along the river when the whole country from Prairie du Chien to Fort Snelling was one continuous wilderness. The scenery of this whole region is described as grand and picturesque, but the country offered no inducements for settlement so long as it remained in the possession of a barbarous and semi-civilized population.

It was customary for all boats going up the river at the time Captain Nichols went up in the "Ariel, and for many years after, to put aboard a regular arsenal at Prairie du Chien, for from that point an attack might constantly be expected. Even when boats steamed quietly up or down the stream it was not an unfrequent occurrence to be shot at by a dozen ambushed braves, whose chief object was to kill the pilot, and thus possibly get possession of the vessel and its cargo.

Steamboat trips were also made slow and laborious by the necessity of having to go ashore and cut wood whenever the supply became scanty, and often the Indians chased the men off the banks while chopping, obliging them to leave their axes and take to the boat before any wood had been gotten aboard. Steering in those days had to be done entirely by the appearance of the water, and there were only a few pilots on the river who could be entrusted with the responsibility of taking the wheel.

Game was very abundant upon both sides of the river, and having no vandal hunters in those times wild fowl and pigeons nested in the country and raised their brood undisturbed. The whole range of bluffs on the Minnesota side of the river, was a favorite resort for deer, because of the food furnished them by the acorns which strewed the hillsides. From here they entered the water of the river at night to escape the merciless and persistent attacks of mosquitoes, and were often lassoed in the evening while swimming over the river, by the steamboatmen.

Boats often stopped at favorite points on the river to allow some of the men to get off and replenish the supply of fresh meat by a few well directed shots outside of the timber that bordered the Mississippi river. Elk was very abundant, and further west buffalo was still to be found. Gen. Sibley even states that buffalo came within a short distance of his trading post, at the mouth of the Minnesota river.

These scenes and experiences during the early years on the Upper Mississsppi offer a telling contrast to the view presented to-day from the decks of the floating palāces that now incessantly steam up and down the "Father of Waters." What more powerful and forcible tribute can be bestowed upon the mighty stride of civilization than the wonderful change wrought upon the banks of the world's greatest stream in one generation.

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE FIRST TRIP.

Mr. Nichols first took the wheel on the Ariel, Captain Shepard, in the spring of 1840, running from St. Louis to Fort Snelling. The trip was made for the Government, and the Ariel carried winter supplies to the Fort. During the eight months the season lasted four trips were made. This post was then occupied by about 1,000 soldiers, and the only cargo of the boat was the supplies and provisions destined for them, while mainly furs comprised the return freight.

Large forests decked a considerable portion of the country upon both sides of the river all the way above Davenport, and the remainder consisted of extended prairies swarming with tents and Indians. Not the merest vestige of civilized habitation was visible between Prairie du Chien and Fort Snelling, with the exception of a shanty at the foot of Lake Pepin, near where Wabashaw is now located. This house was the home of a half-breed, who traded on a small scale with the Indians.

The site now occupied by Winona was believed to be subject to overflow in the highest water, and this drawback prevented as early a settlement there as its advantageous position otherwise would have affected. From the deck of a steamer passing at the highest stage the space left dry really appeared very small, and the Indians laughed at the supposed folly of the white men in building on an island.

The last return trip was made in November. At this time the water was exceedingly low, and it was impossible for the steamer to come any further up than St. Croix, three miles below

Hastings and thirty miles below St. Paul. At this point the soldiers from the fort had to meet the vessel, and while a detachment stood guard, the others poled the freight to the fort. On such occasions when landings must be made, as when it was necessary to cut wood, the Indians would become bothersome, but they could generally be pacified by the steamboatmen giving them food. They could not be trusted, however, and the whites had always to be on the lookout for some treacherous work on their part.

Another remarkable event to be recorded in connection with the experiences of this memorable trip was the snow storm which occurred in the middle of July, covering the green vegetation with five or six inches of snow. The strange appearance produced by this contrariety of nature may be better imagined than described. Floating ice almost filled the river above Prairie du Chien, and for half a day the vessel was obliged to remain landed, the storm preventing an outlook. General Crosby, of La Crosse, in a conversation upon pioneer times, recalled having witnessed the snow fall in New York, where he then was. The storm lasted for a day and the next the snow melted away.

ABILITY AS A RAFTSMAN.

Mr. Nichols has had considerable experience in the management of rafts, both before and after steamboats were employed in running them. As soon as his father's lumber business had become settled upon a stable footing he was called into its employment, and for four years he ran rafts from the mill. Mr. B. F. Heuston, an old friend of the family, thus speaks of the young riverman at this period.

"I first met the family of Jonathan Nichols at Roaring Creek in September of 1844. A raft of lumber was just in readiness to be run, and I was surprised to hear that a beardless boy was to steer the raft to Dubuque. This was the youthful George C. Nichols, destined to become the 'Star Pilot' of the Upper Mississippi, I was also present on his return, and heard him relate the story of piloting the 'strings' down Black river, the separation of the strings into 'platforms,' and how the 'chutes' that formed the mouth of that difficult river were run; heard, also, a discussion of the respective merits of 'Raft Channel,' 'Broken Gun,' and 'Black Snake' chutes, (this was before the Gibbs and Harward chutes were opened;) heard the story of running the Mississippi and making the then difficult harbor of Dubuque, and, as a climax of surprise, heard young George tell of steering the boat on which he returned to Prairie La Crosse.

"The question as to how a raft should be made to 'hug the point,' and how to 'lay to,' 'make the bend' below, how it should

be landed and where the best eddies were for tying up rafts, how to judge which side of an island a raft was drawing, how to lay a raft to prevent 'saddlebogging' on an island, and a hundred other technical maneuvers, as well as the latest changes in the channel, were all vigorously discussed by him to many eager listeners, who in those days of small enterprises and self dependence were interested in such matters; for rafts were not then run by steamboats as now, and owners were often compelled to trust to their own skill in getting their lumber to market. George Nichols at twenty was authority in all these river matters.

"It is not, however, strange that his youthful mind should have been filled with river affairs and ambitions, when we recall the stirring experiences of his boyhood as indicated by his father's narratives of river travel in which the boy was a participant; nor would the wonder be increased were we to allude to the story of his mother, who told me herself that she was reared in sight of the Susquehanna, where, in high water, she could see all day long the running of rafts past her father's door, and how, as long as she lived, she wished to be where she could see a river and watch the rafts that floated upon its current."

This interesting account of an early period in Mr. Nichols' long career shows conclusively the natural inclination he possessed for the occupation he had chosen, and there came soon to him both opportunity and compensatory practice, following in the train of that fortune which gave him, through his mother, a river-loving inheritance. But of late years he has not had much practice in the running of rafts, though, perhaps, his greatest feat in this line was performed while pilot on the *Bill Henderson*, in 1867, taking one of the largest rafts which ever floated down the Mississippi river, from Stillwater to Alton Island. This raft measured 700 feet long by 400 wide, and compares very favorably with to-day's rafting.

MOVING THE WINNEBAGO INDIANS.

In 1848, arrangements were inaugurated with a view to the removal of the various Indian tribes along the Mississippi river to some distance place further inland, where the encroachments of civilization had not yet manifested themselves, and to which it might be years before they would extend. For, the gradual settlement, in the river towns, of a more cultured population commenced an incessant struggle between the Indians and the whites, between savage and civilized life, between races, for the possession of total supremacy over the rich uplands and fertile prairies of the Northwest.

The steamer *Dr. Franklin*, Captain M. W. Ludwig, piloted by Mr. Nichols, was employed by the Government in removing the Winnebago tribe to a point on the Minnesota river, some fifty or sixty miles from St. Paul. H. L. Dousman had the contract of removing, which occupied three months. The Indians were picked up along the whole course of the Mississippi, from Prairie du Chien to Fort Snelling, and collected in large gangs at convenient places of shipment.

But the whole undertaking was very laborious, for when the decision to remove the savages was proclaimed to them it was not accepted with any spirit of willingness or resignation. The Indian nature in common, perhaps, with that of any other human race whose native soil was rapidly being invaded by a strange people, is notoriously deficient of those characteristics which breed these doubtful virtues. The two characters which

met upon this glorious land of ours, in the Caucasian and the American, were, and are, irreconcilably inconsistent.

Not only were they opposed to the fact of being forced to move, but the land assigned them was far from being satisfactory. On the contrary, they swore they would not go, and employed every means available to give emphasis to this determination. At one time, when a ship load had been collected at La Crosse, and everything was in readiness for taking them aboard, they broke through the place in which they had been confined, and taking their ponies from the adjacent corral, galloped away in all directions.

The trials of the transfer are described as very exciting. About 300 persons were taken aboard at each trip, the cabin was given up to them, and a squad of soldiers left aboard to guard against any hostile manoeuvre. Still many of them jumped overboard, and, while several succeeded in swimming the river and making good their escape, the rest were caught again, except a few who were drowned. The women and children were generally the most bothersome.

On these occasions, when their discontentment culminated in outward manifestations, appeared the true Indian character in all its cunning, wily and smirking attempts upon life and property. Many illustrations were here presented of the reasons why their intimate association was not desired by the whites. Even after they had been landed at the places assigned them they would return again and again to their native haunts, and it was only through the most persistent efforts of the officers having them in charge that they were coaxed to remain upon the new reservation.

EARLY POPULATION OF RIVER TOWNS.

The population residing in the river towns between St. Louis and Fort Snelling, the extreme navigable points, a quarter of a century ago, was composed of all grades and conditions of men. The opposite sex was but sparsely represented, and the consequent absence of the softening influence of women was immediately made apparent when thrown into this incongruous association. And there were but few resorts in those days kept free from the contaminating influence of outlaws, gamblers, thieves and suspicious middle men, who always infest new regions with their presence.

The river boats received their share of this mixed assembly of men, both in the form of crews and passengers. Still Mr. Nichols recalls the early captains and pilots, as well as mates and clerks, whom he was thrown into company with, as upon the whole a gentlemanly set of men, far above the average crowd he was wont to meet. And the incidents he recalls of his acquaintances among these fellow associates, breathe a flavor of old-time chivalry and thorough manliness. But as he is of a quiet, unobtrusive disposition, never addicted to the use of stimulants in any form, we may infer that he only made the acquaintance of those days' society.

The steamboats usually landed at every town and trading post along the river, and as these events occurred with pleasing irregularity, the sight of a steamer drew the less occupied inhabitants to the river banks. And a motley assembly they sure-

ly constituted; besides squaws and braves, struggling in agreeable fellowship with ragged boys and women for the loose scraps they might pick up on the decks, or bothering the passengers for a multitudinous array of small favors. On the other hand, the village inhabitants had also their cause to complain when the boats landed and the "mariners" were let loose. The "rafters," especially, did justice to the proverbial habits of "river man."

The steamers passing up the river brought squads of immigrants to the villages which soon began to spring up along the banks. The more northern places were the most favored by the settlement of these throngs of half-clad and half-starved people. The rich lumber yield of the Black river country drew toward it an enterprising, thrifty set of men who soon laid the foundation to independent fortunes and gave renown to the forests of Wisconsin.

St. Paul, called "Pig's Eye" in its early day by the jealous scorers of other localities, also seemed to "boom" in the tide of the inflowing population. Each vessel coming up the river brought a hundred or more persons to this point. They were the most destitute people the steamboatmen have ever seen, and many of them had not the bare necessities of life. Poorly clad and half starved they would greedily eat anything given them. The steamboat captains were then a set of very humane men, and would take from their own pockets to provide the half-starved creatures with food and clothing.

Improvements were slow, there being no particular demand for them. The few travelers happening along were accommodated in the houses of the inhabitants, and the happy-go-lucky style of life was but seldom interrupted. With the removal of the Indians and the stirring advent of the war, a more enterprising spirit began to develop, augmented by the rich products of the pineries, until a start was given a few towns, which sent them steadily onward in a rapid growth, and constituted them the milestones of the Mississippi river.

SOME ANECDOTES AND PERSONALIA.

It was along in the neighborhood of the 50's that Nichols was pilot on the Pearl, Captain Armor, with George W. Girden, now steamboat inspector at Galena, as clerk. On one of the trips from St. Paul to Galena a heavy south wind arose, so strong that the boat was thrown about in a perilous manner and could make but slow headway. Upon arriving at the head of Lake Pepin the vessel was, therefore, laid to the shore until the storm should have subsided.

But the clerk was not at his ease about this arrangement; for, knowing the pilot's boldness and intrepidity, he feared that an attempt might be made to cross the lake during the night before the weather had cleared up. As he could not swim, the risk such a passage would involve appeared very great, and without mentioning his intentions to any one he quietly stole from aboard, taking the watchman with him for company and aid.

In the night they walked the whole length of the lake, about thirty miles, through bushes and trees, without a road or even a footpath, arriving at the other extremity in the morning, where the boat soon after reached them. The watchman related afterwards that he was obliged to carry Mr. Girden upon his back the last six miles, as the young man's strength gave entirely out and they did not dare to delay for rest, fearing the boat might pass and leave them. This little incident becomes particularly interesting from the fact that these two men were, probably, the first white persons who ever completed this jour-

ney on foot regardless of the obstacles of a wild country, wild men and wild animals.

While Mr. Nichols was pilot on the Menominee, in the fall of 1850, his father came down from Black River Falls for the purpose of meeting him at one of the ports along the river. The old gentleman was accompanied by Wm. T. Price, now Member of Congress from Wisconsin, and drove in a lumber wagon and with a team of which Mr. Nichols owned one horse and Mr. Price the other. They were bound for Madison to attend court there, and waited two days at Prairie du Chien for the Menominee to arrive up the river, in order to obtain some money from the pilot.

Upon meeting the father explained to his son that he came to borrow about \$200 with which to wind up a divorce case in which his daughter was one of the parties. George C. called upon the clerk for that amount out of his wages, and upon it being immediately counted out to him he gave his father the money, and saw the pair start off upon the remainder of their journey, while the steamboat proceeded up the river. It may not be amiss to mention here that Mr. Nichols has never heard more of the \$200.

A little incident which occurred while our pilot was employed on the Davidson Line, under Captain Moulton, in 1865, may be inserted here, to show the whole-souled nature of steamboat men of that day.

A woman with two or three children had come on board of the boat to take passage with it, but when the clerk came to collect the fare he found she had only a small fraction of the amount necessary to defray that expense, and therefore ordered her to get off. She begged to be allowed to stay telling him her destitute circumstances, and the dilemma in which she would

be placed if left behind. As her story had the appearance of coming from a truthful source, and she herself seeming a worthy woman, Mr. Nichols stepped down from his place at the wheel, and offered to have her expenses on the trip charged to his account.

This magnanimity on his part drew forth the thankful tears of the woman, and the scene collected quite a crowd around the group. Captain Moulton came up to inquire the cause of the disturbance, and, upon hearing the voluntary offer of the pilot, called out:

"No, you won't, George, I will see that the woman is properly cared for, myself."

This conclusion was perfectly satisfactory to our pilot, and he quietly returned to his post and sent the boat on her way.

It was late in the fall of 1855, about the first of November, that the steamer Greek Slave, Captain Louis Robert, master, and George Nichols, pilot, was being loaded at Galena, preparatory to making her last trip for the season. When about to start a portion of the crew abandoned her, fearing that the vessel would be caught in the floating ice, and they thus experienced difficulty in returning to their homes. But the pilot and the engineer, with the mate and a firehand, promised the captain to remain with him.

With this small crew the heavily loaded boat, with two barges attached, started out one morning in very pleasant weather, though the low stage of water caused considerable difficulty in crossing the various bars below Winona. At the Winona bar they became stuck fast, and it took the few men six hours to loosen the boat and barges. It was now four o'clock in the afternoon, and the whole crew was completely exhausted.

Mr. A. L. Larpenteur, an old pioneer and now merchant at

St. Paul, Minn., was among the passengers, and having been a close observer of the events of the trip, came forward at this moment and proffered his services to the captain. The offer was immediately and gratefully accepted, and the control of the boat passed over to Mr. Larpenteur. That gentleman pressed on up the river with all the manoeuvres of an old steamboatman, discharging a little freight at Winona, and reached Fountatn City at about supper time.

Here the boat laid up until midnight, giving the crew five hours' rest ; by this time the improvised captain had the steam up, and the refreshed men pushed ahead for their destination, Mr. Larpenteur standing watch in his turn. This narrative is recited as an illustration of the many trials river men were exposed to in the days of sparse settlements, and when beacon lights and other aiding contrivances were totally unknown to the navigator.

THE REMUNERATION OF A PILOT.

The wages of a steamboat pilot are, and have always been ranked as very high, and, though the present earnings of the class fall far below the compensation allowed twenty or thirty years since, they still compare favorably with any other employment requiring similar or contiguous attributes in the performer. Considering the very few good pilots upon the river before, and during the war, and the many hardships and difficulties they were exposed to, it is not to be greatly wondered at, that a liberal pecuniary share of these high priced times should be allotted them. And a recital of few of the wages received for services rendered in the capacity of a first-class pilot may, perhaps; prove interesting.

We will pass back to 1846, when Mr. Nichols piloted the Anthony Wayne from Galena to Fort Snelling and return, a six day's trip, and the Prairie Bird from St. Louis to Marine Mills, Wis., another week's trip, during a short lay-up of his own trip; for the first of these tours he received \$200, and for the second \$250. And during the three months he was occupied in moving the Winnebago Indians (1848) he was paid \$200 per month; while his net income during 1851, obtained in piloting transient boats, was \$6,000.

Captain Nichols then took charge of the Greek Slave, (1855,) receiving from Captain Robert, its owner and master, a salary of \$900 per month, in addition to the present of a lot on St. Anthony's Hill, St. Paul, which he subsequently disposed of fo

\$1,200. But in order to accept this position he was obliged to pay a forfeit of \$500 to the Minnesota Packet Company, the receipt of which payment he has still in his possession, and which reads as follows:

"Received from George Nichols Five Hundred Dollars being the amount of his forfeit in his bond with Minnesota Packet Company if he failed to work out the season.

"Galena, July 12, '55.

Galena & Min. P. K. Co.

ORRIN SMITH, President.

In settling accounts with the Adelia, at the close of the season of 1857, Mr. Nichols took the boat's note for \$620, payable as soon as the owner could sell the vessel or dispose of some other property. Late in the fall he succeeded in raising enough money to pay the crew, and so sent for his pilot. Mr. Nichols came, and the captain drew forth a 500-dollar bill, asking him if that scrap of paper would not square up accounts.

"Seeing as the Captain seems hard-up," answered our pilot, "I think I can afford to spare the odd \$120, so give me the 500 and you can have your note."

This is an instance of the ease with which money was parted with, and will serve as a counter illustration to the ease with which it was earned.

While piloting on the Davidson Line, in 1864, he was paid \$300 per month, and even as late as 1876 he could sometimes earn \$30 a day taking boats over the upper rapids at Davenport, an eighteen-mile trip, at \$10 per tour. To say that Mr. Nichols has received upwards of \$150,000 in salary, during his career as a steamboat pilot, is a moderate estimate.

And yet the vast sum has entirely disappeared, as rapidly and quietly as it was acquired. With a kind heart and an open hand, Mr. Nichols has always met adversity and want in his fellow men, sharing with his less fortunate associates as long as his means lasted; and adding to such a nature the demands of an extravagant family, it is a wonder he has even kept himself out of debt.

"I have seen the day," says Mr. Nichols, "when I could buy out this town," referring to La Crosse, his present home, "and when the men who now dwell amidst opulence, were struggling along in no better condition than I am now." But thus are the ups and downs of life; it may demand a certain degree of ability to earn money, but a superior degree of prudence is requisite to retain it. There are said to be circumstances in each man's life, which if taken at the flood will lead on to fortune; but there are also circumstances in every man's life, which if taken at the ebb will lead on to poverty. And, although Mr. Nichols has not been entirely landed at the foot of fortune's ladder, he has still experienced the humiliation of witnessing his own decline simultaneously with the advance of those who were once behind him. This refers to his pecuniary, and consequent social position only; his physical and mental capabilities have merely suffered from the gradual demands of advancing age, coupled with a stirring life and conjugal misery.

A WRECK AND A DISASTER.

Two eventful occurrences, happening in close succession, and deserving to constitute a special topic, may be introduced at this point in our narrative of a pilot's life. They illustrate alike the thorough ability requisite in men occupying this and similar positions, and the courage and fortitude which they so often display.

About ten years after Mr. Nichols was engaged in the removal of the Indians, in the *Dr. Franklin*, he found himself again as pilot upon this boat, and Captain Ludwig was still her master. Toward the close of this season occurred the event about to be described, which so suddenly cut short the existence of this familiar steamboat. With about 400 passengers aboard, she steamed gallantly down the broad waters of the Mississippi one dark, dismal evening of October, entrusted to the care of Jerome Smith, the second pilot.

At midnight came Mr. Nichols' turn to take the wheel, and when they were about six miles above Dubuque, he emerged from the cabin and passed forward to go on duty. Just as he emerged above the cabin he saw a huge, dark object heaving in sight, and immediately called to the man at the wheel:

"Back, back her! Don't you see that you are running into something?"

But the pilot seemed to have lost his wits, and exclaimed in his excitement:

"I don't know what to do with her, George ; come and help me !"

Mr. Nichols hurried forward, but before he had taken many steps the sombre obstruction appeared in the outline of a steamboat, and—crash ! they came together. Then all became confusion. The Dr. Franklin sank rapidly amid the cries and shouts and clamor of an excited throng, and the few moments allotted the crew and the more cool-headed of the passengers to save this human cargo were expended in almost superhuman exertion and deeds of individual bravery.

The strange boat came alongside and proved to be the Galena. The saved were hurried aboard of her in the habit and with the simple effects they had assumed in the precipitated flight ; with many this comprised only their under garments. Upon arriving at Dubuque it was found that only four or five of the entire number aboard the sunken vessel were missing, and these persons were accounted for as drowned. Surely, a grateful termination to an accident which might have numbered its victims to twice the tens it had units. And Mr. Nichols recalls the event with the manly satisfaction of having done his duty.

In close proximity to the above event occurred (1858) the collision of the Gray Eagle and the Itaska. The former boat was returning from a trip to Minneiska, Minnesota, with Smith Harris as master, and Nichols as pilot. Proceeding quietly down the stream, the Gray Eagle rapidly approaching one of the many abrupt turns which especially characterizes the Mississippi, and just as it arrived at the point the Itaska coming up stream, ran into her at full speed.

The larboard wheel of the Gray Eagle was torn completely off, but otherwise she suffered only a few bruises, not sufficient to force her to land for repairs. As there were from 406 to 500 passengers aboard a delay of this nature would have become

extremely annoying. But Mr. Nichols took the vessel, in the dilapidated condition it now was, to Galena, a distance of 800 miles down the river, and earned well the praise that was bestowed upon him for skill and boldness.

SPIRITED RACING.

The absolute necessity for every steambaat upon the Mississippi river to maintain its character and reputation against the willful encroachments and usurpations of any other boat, was in early days so vital that the racing propensity of a river steamer has become almost proverbial. A captain would rather expose himself to the possibilities of wrecking his boat on an impediment, or exposing the overtaxed boilers, than allow an approaching rival to outdistance him. And the pilot was his right hand in every such encounter.

It follows as a natural consequence that such an old pilot as Mr. Nichols should have participated in an extensive number of these spirited contests, among the river boats, for superiority of speed. And from a vast repository in this line he selects the race of the *Adelia* and *Gray Eagle*, in June of 1857, as especially typical of these old-time races. Both vessels were at this time lying at the St. Paul wharf, ready to proceed down the river. The former was commanded by Captain Gillett and piloted by Mr. Nichols, while Captain Smith Harris was the master of the latter.

"How soon are you going out, George?" Captain Harris called over to the pilot of the *Adelia*, and was answered:

"Right away, Captain."

The *Adelia* immediately swung off, and turned down stream with the *Gray Eagle* right behind her. Hastings was the first port on the route, and, upon arriving here, the *Adelia* was already 400 yards ahead of her rival. Seeing a man with a

horse and buggy at the landing the boat's head was turned up stream, preparatory to stopping, and Captain Gillett called out :

"If you want to come aboard, stranger, be quick about it."

"I am going on the Gray Eagle," answered the man.

Upon which response the Adelia lost no time in regaining her course and slipping out into the stream, just ahead of the Gray Eagle. The latter boat paid no attention to the demands of the party on the river bank, but throwing ashore the freight bound for the place, and without stopping, she hurried after the Adelia, from the deck of which boat we will continue to view the race.

At Red Wing a sufficiently long stop was made for a few passengers to get aboard, but the Adelia managed to swing out into the stream just as her ardent follower appeared in sight. Reed's Landing was the next port, and here the Adelia had a half-mile start, while at Winona she was a mile and a half ahead. But after leaving this point her supply of wood became very scarce, and a stop must soon be made to replenish this indispensable factor to her progress.

So at a place of supply, ten miles below Winona, the Adelia rounded to the shore, threw her rope around a convenient tree, and sent all the available crew out to carry on board the wood piled along the river bank. When about five cords had been secured the Gray Eagle appeared from behind a turn in the river, close up to them. And now came the tug of war. The men threw down their filled or half-filled loads wherever they happened to be, and while a few ran to untie the rope, the remainder hurried aboard to get everything in readiness for an immediate start. But the line with which the boat had been tied became entangled, so that it would take a few minutes to unfasten it, seeing which Mr. Nichols called out :

"Never mind the line, boys, but get aboard."

And thereupon sent his boat into the stream, breaking the rope and losing about sixty feet of it; but he managed to get a few yards ahead of the Gray Eagle, and what more could be wished. Even if his finger had been cut off in the endeavor to win the race we believe it would have been willingly sacrificed toward such a result. Every man whose services were not elsewhere required, crowded upon the deck with the passengers, in the exultation of their boat's success, and the lively interest of the company found vent in the jesting remarks and triumphant expressions which were freely bestowed upon the gradually losing boat.

The chagrin of Captain Harris and his company at meeting with this disappointment, after being offered so grand an opportunity to beat their competitor, somewhat cooled their ardor and lessened their enthusiasm; but the Gray Eagle still continued the chase, and, though to gain it was out of the question, she sought to lose as small a distance as possible. In the next twenty miles' run to La Crosse the Gray Eagle reached the landing just as the Adelia had completed her business there and was leaving, and when Mr. Nichols landed his boat at the final destination, at Dubuque, the Gray Eagle was at Eagle Point, three miles above.

Thus ended this eagerly contested race of 400 miles. Both vessels had maintained a break-neck speed and curtailed their landings to the briefest time allowable. For when a steamboat gets the racing fever there are very few exigencies in this world of sufficient significance to pacify it. Captain Harris admitted that he would rather have bribed the pilot of the Adelia three or four hundred dollars than to have been beaten so completely, and the following season he hired Mr. Nichols to hold the wheel on board the Gray Eagle.

While employed upon this boat he soon had an opportunity

offered to show his skill as pilot, and also to retrieve the honor of the Gray Eagle by winning for it a lively race in the middle part of this season, (1858.) The Queen of England's message had just been received at Dubuque, through the eastern papers, and was to be transmitted to the press of St. Paul with all possible rapidity. The latter city was then the only great center of the Northwest capable of being reached within a short time, and consequently its publishers vied with each other in promulgating important news with all the rapidity that the absence of railroads and telegraphs would allow.

The Gray Eagle lay at the Dubuque wharf, with two or three other boats, waiting for the important papers to be brought aboard. She was also fortunate enough to obtain her paper the first of all, and started off immediately with the others soon behind. A few landings were made, but many others were omitted to save time. Throughout the whole trip of twenty-two hours the Gray Eagle kept perseveringly at the head, and when about a rod from the St. Paul shore the clerk fastened the paper containing the message to a club of wood and threw it ashore into the outstretched hands of a newspaper reporter. He ran away with it up the street and Mr. Nichols soon left the city with his boat.

TOWING.

To transport successfully a heavy tow brings into requisition all the ability and shrewdness of the pilot, as well as of the captain. And the following feat in this line may, perhaps, be classed with the most difficult achievements of this nature.

While Mr. Nichols was pilot upon the Victory, (1876,) Captain Duncan, he took her from La Crosse to St. Louis, with a tow consisting of an old steamboat hull and two barges, filled with grain. The span at the Burlington bridge was too narrow for such a broad fleet, and there was no convenient place above the bridge where part of the load could be temporarily left. So a neat, though hazardous, plan was resorted to ; one of the barges was let loose and dropped through an adjacent span, simultaneously with the passage of the steamboat and the remainder of the tow through the main opening, and was caught and attached again just as it emerged.

This splendid job can not be performed but by a skillful management, and it required just two such fast steamboatmen as Nichols and Duncan to accomplish it. At the Keokuk, Quincy and Hannibal bridges a part of the tow was left above while the rest was taken through ; but at the Louisiana bridge the entire fleet passed beneath the span at one time. This is only an example of the class of work entrusted to Mr. Nichols, and illustrates alike the talent he could boast of and the confidence he commanded.

An incident akin to the preceding and requiring as subtle

maneuvering was the running of the Gray Eagle up stream through Coon Slough during the night, and down again in the daytime, *without stopping a wheel*. This slough is a crooked strait eighteen miles below La Crosse, and the boat was 250 feet long, with forty feet beam. Mr. Nichols is perhaps the only man who ever attempted and succeeded in this performance, and he accomplished it away back in '58.

THE EPILEPTICAL ATTACK.

For nigh unto eighteen years Mr. Nichols suffered from the dreadful attacks of epilepsy, a disease which first appeared when he went over the rapids above Davenport, in 1864, while piloting the Jenny Baldwin. The captain was obliged himself to steer the boat ashore and then send to Davenport for a pilot. A doctor was also brought, and under his treatment Mr. Nichols soon recovered. During the following five or six years, after this first experience, the attack came on but seldom, once or twice in the season at the most; but after the seventies he became more frequently prostrated by their onset.

These enervating spasms cannot be said, singular as the statement may seem, to ever have occurred while he was on duty at the wheel, with the exception of the first attack. For if they had he could not have satisfactorily held the many responsible positions he occupied during the succeeding years. It may be mentioned, however, that his immediate associates were, for many years, the only individuals aware of the pilot's trouble; and being a general favorite among the crew of whatever boat he was on he excited their sympathy and good feeling in his behalf, so that he was quietly nursed and the affair kept as much private as possible.

A worthy illustration of the man's energy and will-power is furnished in the fact that he often resisted an approaching spell, in the earliest stages of the disease, while he stood at the wheel, and only fell exhausted and unconscious when he reached his

cabin. But at length the attacks became more and more frequent. All work had to be abandoned, and with a constitution entirely deprived of all its nerve and strength, and bodily and mental ruin staring him in the face, threatening a premature end, the veteran pilot dragged himself to the home of his son.

"Why!" the interested reader will exclaim, "Could he not be cured?" It seemed so. No stone had been left unturned to consult the physicians of every port at which he landed; and ever since the first doctor had him in charge and the first medicine was administered, away back, in 1864, he has been in the hands of a host of able practitioners and expended a large sum of money in the hope of, at least partially, effecting a cure.

Then it was that he came to consult Dr. George E. Powell, (Night Hawk,) one of the well known Powell brothers, at his institute, in La Crosse. This was in February of 1883, and the disease had then culminated into such a stage that his whole strength was exhausted. He could barely drag himself into the office, and had several spells in succession after he had entered the room. The doctor made a thorough study of the case which was so vividly portrayed before his eyes, and after an analysis of the symptoms presented he prescribed for the patient.

"The fourth spoonful cured me!" exclaims the captain whenever this topic is mentioned. And cured he has been, though it was probably not so rapidly effected as by a few doses. The epileptical attack was banished as suddenly as it appeared. Dr. Powell has given the Captain a written assurance that no apprehensions of a return of the disease need ever be entertained; and an acquaintance with Captain Nichols to-day must confirm one in the belief that he is in the possession, both of bodily vigor and mental equilibrium. He has furnished the materials for this history, reciting them impromptu from mem-

ory, and what stronger proof of the statement here contained can be offered than a perusal of these pages.

The disease sprang from no hereditary taint or innate defect in the man's nature, but had its root in deep family misery and collateral circumstances. To employ his own words he has had "a heap of trouble." He speaks of the Doctors, George E. and Will. A. Powell, associated in "Powells' Medical and Surgical Institute," with considerable warmth, for their gentlemanly conduct and humane treatment, and considering the debt he owes "Night Hawk" the loudest praise in his favor will not appear exaggerated.

CONCLUSION.

The preceding pages present the most important incidents in a pioneer steamboat pilot's varying life, and a few entertaining sketches of his recollections from forty years' active experience upon the Mississippi river. We have not sought to create a hero by the fabrication of startling adventures or romantic occurrences; by predicting prodigious feats of valor or astonishing accomplishments of lucky accidents. But a truthful history, unembellished beyond a decorous propriety, has been the Editor's aim in the preparation of the preceding pages. And, though their material may not be admired for its splendor, we are satisfied if it be appreciated for its simplicity.

Mr. Nichols belongs to a class of men of whom but little is known outside the river-traveling public, and who are often omitted when their similarly employed fellows in other occupations are mentioned. His object, therefore, is to bring to the front and call attention to the steamboat pilots, as staunch and worthy an order of men as any other vocation can boast of. And by the recital of his own trials and vicissitudes, his own fortune and success, he presents a fair type of the men engaged in this employment.

The Captain has fully recovered his health, and looks as hale and hearty as ever. Although anxious once more to turn the wheel, he has been obliged to refuse some very good offers in this direction, wishing to devote his time at present to the publication and sale of this work. His whole time and energy has been, and will be, given to the successful termination of this long-cherished wish. For, though his existence has had its unhappy and sorrowful periods, in common with the rest of mankind, yet he believes in the suppression of the memories their mention calls forth, and the unsevered enjoyment of the happy and pleasant recollections with which his life is studied. In appreciation of this sentiment we join with Joanna Ballie, when she says that—

“From the sad years of Life
We sometimes do short hours, yea, minutes strike,
Keen, blissful, bright, never to be forgotten;
Which, thro’ the dreary gloom of Time o’erpast,
Shine like fair sunny spots on a wild waste.”

