16. Crossing the Mississippi River

The Mississippi River was a significant challenge for our pioneer ancestors and all people who wanted to travel west. Let's look at a few resources that help us see exactly how difficult it was. Here is an interesting essay written in 1920 by Henry Clinton Parkhurst and transcribed for the State Historical Society of Iowa. However, it is important to remember that the conditions described here prevailed in the ten to twenty years before Heinrich and Maria made their trip. By 1854 the journeys and experiences of many previous travelers would have helped to make safer and better crossings possible.

CROSSING THE MISSISSIPPI

In the early movement of settlers to Iowa, the Mississippi River played a double role. To the emigrants from Virginia, Kentucky, and other States bordering on the Ohio and Mississippi, it served as an invaluable highway. To those who came overland from Chicago, Milwaukee, or any point in Illinois, on the other hand, it loomed up as an almost impassable barrier. Either as an aid or a hindrance to travel, it was a factor all early emigrants had to reckon with.

The difficulties to be encountered by travel in a white-topped emigrant wagon in those early days can hardly be over-emphasized. There were few roads and no bridges. Broken traces and mired wheels were the common happenings of a day's journey. Rivers proved to be an unfailing source of trouble. The small streams were crossed by fording, the larger ones by swimming the teams, wagons and all. But when the Father of Waters was reached, these methods were out of the question: here apparently was an insurmountable obstacle. However, these eager home seekers were not willing to be deprived of the hard-earned fruits of their trying journey—now lying within sight—by a mere river. And out of this situation came the ferry. The earliest type of ferry to operate on the Mississippi River was the canoe. It served the Indians as a means of crossing long before the whites penetrated as far west as the Mississippi. When the white explorers finally reached the valley region, they also adopted the customary mode of crossing long followed by their red predecessors. At a still later period, the canoe answered the more frequent and pressing demands of the hunters and trappers on their way to and from the country then regarded as the far west. It even survived till the day when occasional home seekers in their emigrant wagons found their way into that pioneer region.

Only the ordinary difficulties and risks of canoeing attended the crossing of the river by the Indians, white explorers, and trappers; but with the emigrants it was different. For as a pioneer account relates, "wagons had to be unloaded and taken to pieces, and both they and their loads shipped in small cargoes at a voyage, till all were over; then the teams had to be unharnessed or unyoked and made to swim, the horses being led by the halter at the side of the canoe, and the oxen by the horns."

The depth and flow of the Mississippi River varied by season, being deepest and having the strongest currents during and after the spring thaws, when melted snow rushed down the 2000-mile journey to the Gulf of Mexico. The five original New Vienna pioneers are said to have constructed their own ferry out of crude logs they fashioned from trees they felled near the river, and they crossed the river in August, when the river was probably at a low ebb. The Ellison story recounts a winter crossing. Let's continue with the Henry Clinton Parkhurst essay.

A still more hazardous undertaking was the crossing in winter, and in the springtime when huge cakes of ice raced along on the swift current, ready to smash into splinters any luckless craft that

might get in the way. But this was not always taken into account by travelers eager to reach their destination, and sometimes, in the face of imminent peril, they insisted on being ferried over.

An example of this is afforded by the story of a New Englander—a young college graduate wholly unfamiliar with the stern conditions of pioneer life. He arrived at a point on the Illinois shore opposite Burlington, in December 1840. Being very anxious to get across the river that evening, he tried to engage the services of the ferryman, who, however, flatly refused to venture on the river in the dark, giving as his reason that the floating ice made it far too perilsome. Nothing daunted by the ferryman's dark and foreboding picture, the easterner still demanded to be taken over, but it proved futile. So instead of the hoped for conveniences of a Burlington hotel, he was forced to accept the more scant offerings of a one-roomed cabin, and submit to the discomfort of sleeping in the same room with thirty others—men, women, and children. But the next day when the canoe landed him safely on the Burlington side of the river after an hour's trying struggle among the floating cakes of ice, he probably felt less bitter toward the stubborn ferryman.

While the canoe met very satisfactorily the needs of the early explorers, stray travelers, and occasional home seekers, it proved wholly inadequate for the stream of emigrants which followed the opening of the Black Hawk Purchase. Imagine the situation when a group of twelve or more emigrant wagons lined up on the Illinois shore to be ferried over— the confusion, the frenzied haste to get the wagons unloaded and taken to pieces, the long disheartening wait while the total tonnage of the wagons was being taken over, bit by bit, when the hours dragged and even the best natured grew surly. Hence, to meet this situation brought about by the onrush of settlers to the Iowa country, regular public ferries equipped to carry whole wagonloads at a time came into use.

The regular public ferries passed through several well-defined stages of evolution, easily distinguished by the type of motive power. Flat-boats and skiffs marked the initial stage. The craft generally spoken of as "flat-boats" were huge barge-like affairs, so constructed as to hold wagon, team, and other equipment. They were steered by huge sweeps, often as long as the boats themselves. By some these boats were designated as "mud scows". The distinguishing characteristic of this type was that man supplied the motive power. Propelled in some cases by oars, in others by poles, in still others by huge sweeps, it was nevertheless human strength that furnished the moving force.

Although a marked improvement over the canoe, the flat-boat did not do away with the trials of ferrying. A large element of risk still remained: the craft was always at the mercy of the current and was carried well down stream. After dark the hazards of crossing multiplied and ferrymen charged accordingly. And in many cases it still took an hour or more to cross the river. While it is very likely that the first flat-boat ferry to operate on the Mississippi within the borders of Iowa was one established at Keokuk to serve the early settlers in the Half Breed Tract, there appears to be no recorded evidence to show it. So far as can be gathered from available records, Clark's Ferry at Buffalo marks the opening of flat-boat ferrying in Iowa. The ferry was established by Captain Benjamin W. Clark in 1833 while he was still living at Andalusia, Illinois. For a number of years it held the distinction of being the most noted ferry between Burlington and Dubuque. Indeed, one writer went so far as to state that it was "the most convenient place to cross the Mississippi .... anywhere between Balize and Prairie du Chien." And probably a major portion of the traffic passing from the direction of the Illinois River to the mining region west of the Mississippi, or toward the interior, crossed the river at this point. However, this reputation was short lived, and later developments lead one to believe that it was based more on the conspicuous absence of other ferries than on any intrinsic qualities. In 1836, Antoine Le Claire established a ferry at Davenport—a few miles below Buffalo—and he gradually drew away most of the travel that had heretofore passed over Clark's Ferry. As the stream of emigrants heading for the Iowa country increased in volume, the process of carrying it over the Mississippi in man-propelled craft soon became

inadequate. Probably some ingenious individual saw the absurdity in having humans sweat and toil away at the poles and oars while veritable reservoirs of power rested on the ferry boat, and struck upon the happy idea of making the horses furnish the power. At any rate, a transition did take place wherein the crude flat-boat gave way to the horse ferry, an affair moved by horse power rather than by man power. However, the transition was not a complete one; in many cases this stage was not present, the flat-boat being directly followed by the steam ferry.

In a newspaper published in Bloomington (Muscatine) in 1841 the following notice appears: "A new boat, propelled by horse power, has lately been placed upon the river at this place, for the accommodation of the ferry; and, though hastily made, all of green oak, and clumsy in its exterior, it swims like a swan and will cross in eight minutes with ease and safety. We may flatter ourselves that a ferry is now permanently established."

The third, and by far the most vital step, was the introduction of steam as a motive power. And while very little record is to be had of the actual results of the change from human to horse strength, evidence as to the effects of the transition to steam is abundant. Whole streams of immigration were diverted from their customary avenues of travel to seek the conveniences offered by steam ferries. Nor is this to be wondered at. Regular trips were now made every hour, in some cases every fifteen minutes. Moreover, in sharp contrast to the time it took to cross in a flat-boat—sometimes several hours—the crossing could now be made in five minutes. This spurt in speed of crossing was closely paralleled by a tremendous leap in carrying capacity. For as a matter of fact, the crude flat-boat capable of carrying a single wagon had now grown to a gigantic affair which could carry eighteen or more teams at once, and even whole trains. As in other industries, the introduction of steam marked a new era in the ferry business.

The extent to which steam power revolutionized ferrying is also revealed in the following comment from a Dubuque newspaper: "Bogy's splendid new steam ferryboat is doing the most rushing business of the season. She is puffing and blowing all the time. She is a perfect Godsend to California emigrants. If the number of wagons that she brings across in a day had to abide the tardiness of the old-fashioned horse boat, they would not reach this side in a week. "Probably the first steam ferry to operate on the Mississippi within the borders of Iowa was established by Captain John Wilson in 1852. It is said that he launched the steam ferry as early as 1843, but it was found to be too far in advance of the times and so was taken off the river until 1852. This ferry plied across the river at Davenport

John Wilson was unusually energetic, enterprising, and capable, as a ferryman. In 1837 he purchased Antoine Le Claire's ferry business, and immediately began building new flat-boats. By 1841 he had a horse ferry boat in operation and his steam ferry was launched in 1843. Moreover, he made an arrangement with the Rock River ferry located at the mouth of the Green River, whereby one fare paid the way over both ferries.

A more novel contribution to ferrying at Davenport accredited to the enterprising Wilson was the ferry alarm. The conditions leading to the adoption of the alarm have been ably told by a contemporary writer as follows: "In primitive times in order to arouse the ferryman on the opposite shore the Stephensonites (now Rock Islanders) who had been over here in Davenport to attend evening services and overstayed their time, or zealous Davenporters who after dark had occasion to visit Stephenson in a missionary cause, had to raise the 'war-whoop'. In order to discourage relics of barbarism Mr. Wilson introduced the ferry triangle, an ungainly piece of triangular steel which, when vigorously pounded with a club, sent forth from its gallows tree a most wretched clanging noise. But it brought the skiff though it awakened the whole town."

No account of ferries in Iowa would be complete without some mention at least of tolls, and cost of franchises. As a matter of fact, these are but special phases of the general subject, and they illuminate it materially. In the early days when the Mississippi was crossed in ferries, money was

not so plentiful as it is today. Hence, ferry fees were often paid with goods. The circumstances under which Clark collected his first ferriage afford an instance, and they also show something of the man's temper. A company of French traders on their way from the Iowa River to the Trading Post on Rock Island encamped one evening at Buffalo. The information that Clark intended to establish a ferry across the river at this point, they received as a huge joke, ridiculing the whole enterprise. Nevertheless, they called loudly for the ferry-boat to carry their drove of cattle across, little dreaming that it would appear. Nor is it very likely that they realized the type of man they were dealing with. Captain Clark, his flat-boat completed and ready for service, gathered enough men and boys to operate the boat, and in no pleasant frame of mind set out into the dark to offer his services to the noisy Frenchmen. When the traders noticed the flat-boat approaching, however, they burst into uproarious laughter, aiming to turn the whole matter off as a joke; and they told the Captain they had nothing to ferry and that he might return. But he was not so easily disposed of, for his temper was now thoroughly aroused. He landed his boat, marched into the camp of the Frenchmen with his small crew, and angrily demanded ten dollars as his ferriage fee. The whole affair speedily lost its comical aspects, and the traders saw that the infuriated Captain would brook no further trifling. But to their great embarrassment, they had not ten dollars in money among them. So they offered him two bolts of calico which he accepted.

Another incident arising out of the scarcity of money is related of Antoine Le Claire who established his ferry at Davenport in 1836. As his fee for ferrying a number of sheep over the river, he accepted their fleeces, the owner having had them sheared prior to the crossing. This wool he kept for a while, but failing to find any particular use for it, he finally burned it to get rid of it.

But it must not be understood that it was the daily occurrence for a party to pay its way over the river in calico or in raw wool. These were the unusual and striking incidents. Ordinarily, of course, fares were paid in money. The County Commissioner's Court at Rockingham in May, 1838, fixed the following ferriage rates for the Mississippi River:

Footmen $.18 3/4
Man and horse .50
One vehicle and driver .75
Two horses, vehicle and driver 1.00
Each additional horse or mule .18 3/4
Meat cattle, per head .12 1/2
Sheep or hogs .05
Freight per hundred .06 1/4
From sunset to sunrise, double rates were allowed.

The puzzling feature of this table stands out in the apparent difficulty of making change in 1/2 cents and 1/4 cents. And for both explanation and solution one must go back to a day when money was nearly non-existent. Says a writer of that early day, "During all this time there was no money of any description. Talk about scarcity now a days! Then the only change aside from barter consisted of bits and picayunes—the former a piece of the eighth part of a Spanish milled dollar, cut with a chisel into eight equal parts when the operation was fairly and honestly done, but the skillful and designing often made nine bits and even ten out of one dollar piece. The picayune in like manner was a Spanish quarter cut into four equal parts, hence the origin of these two terms bits and picayunes."

The table then, was based on the actual circulation of the crude bits of chiseled coin which survived a day when money was very scarce. Not infrequently, however, one party or the other had to surrender the half or fourth cent in making change.

While the ferries of early days rendered practically the same public service that the bridges of to-day do, they were, for the most part, established for private profit. And when one considers the

striking similarity between crossing the Mississippi in a ferry-boat and crossing it over a bridge, it seems odd that a toll should have to be paid in the one case and not in the other. Nevertheless, free ferries were as conspicuously absent then as free bridges are prevalent today. On the other hand, the idea of a free public ferry was not altogether unheard of. By legislative act the commissioners of Louisa County were authorized to establish and keep a ferry across the Iowa River which was to render its services free to all the citizens of the county. And at the extra session of the First General Assembly the Mayor and Aldermen of Ft. Madison were authorized to provide for "the free carriage across the Mississippi river for one year, of all persons with their property coming to Ft. Madison for the purpose of trading with its inhabitants and bringing marketing and produce to the place ." Moreover, there was considerable agitation for the free ferry in a number of the larger towns.

License fees kept pace with the rapid development of the ferries in general—the increase in carrying capacity, the substitution of steam in the place of horse or manpower, and the increase in volume of business. Beginning with the humble figure of $2.00 per year or less, the cost of franchises leaped, in the course of time, to the striking figure of $1000 annually. Before the formal granting of ferry franchises through legislative action, licenses were not required. There appears to be no written evidence that either Captain Clark or Antoine Le Claire or Captain John Wilson paid license fees. But with the establishing of ferries through legal processes, charges were made for the right to carry on the business.

The County Commissioner's Court which met at Rockingham in May 1838, fixed the following schedules for licenses on the Mississippi: Davenport, $90.00; Buffalo, $10.00; Rockingham, $8.00; and all others $5.00. How long these schedules remained in force we are not told; very likely it was not many years. Gregoire's ferry established at Dubuque was required to pay $100.00 annually. And the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company was charged $1000 annually for the right to operate on the Missouri at Council Bluffs.

In the course of time the steamboat replaced the steam ferry, and this marked the last stage of water transportation. Then came the bridges and wherever they appeared the ferries became an insignificant factor in crossing the Mississippi. In 1855 the first bridge across the Mississippi at Davenport was completed; eighteen years later a second bridge followed. The Illinois shore was linked to the Iowa shore at Clinton in 1864. Four years later work was in full sway on a bridge at Dubuque. And in 1891 the so called "high bridge" was opened at Muscatine.

It is needless to further catalogue these Mississippi crossings. Suffice it to say that since the nineties all the important river towns have built bridges. And although water crossings still exist and doubtless always will, it is apparent that the spanning of the Mississippi with mighty bridges sounded the death knell of the once prosperous trade of ferrying.

Heinrich and Maria probably had heard of the effort to build a railroad bridge over the Mississippi River, and they may have seen the beginnings of the preparatory grading if they crossed the Mississippi at Davenport in 1854. To travel from Cincinnati to New Vienna in 1854 they would have had to travel by steamboat from Cincinnati to Burlington or Dubuque or gone overland by covered wagon and then crossed the Mississippi. It would be nice to think that they simply boarded a boat in Cincinnati and traveled in relative comfort down the Ohio to Cairo and then up the Mississippi to Burlington or Dubuque. They had a two-month-old infant, my father Henry, and two other small children.

However, river travel by steamboat was not without risk. It seems that in those years, exploding boilers on steamboats, and other accidents of navigation, were not uncommon. On January 8, 1845, the steamboat Belle Zane, on its way from Ohio to New Orleans, struck a snag and turned

bottom up, killing 74 people. On March 14, 1845, the Steamboat Pilot burst her boilers just below New Orleans, killing four people and wounding ten. On September 16, 1848, the Steamer Concordia burst her boilers, killing 28 and wounding 10. On May 17, 1849, a massive fire in St. Louis destroyed 23 steamers. On September 25, 1854, the steamboat Timour exploded near Jefferson City killing 15 and wounding 5 others. Heinrich and Maria would probably have heard about these accidents and may even have been proficient enough in English by 1852 to read for themselves in the *Daily St. Louis Intelligencer* the following graphic and grisly account of the horrific explosion on the Glencoe. They would certainly have read in the German language newspaper *The Louisville Anzeiger* about the explosion on the Saluda six days later in Lexington, and they would have been very grateful that their steamboat from New Orleans in 1845 had not capsized or exploded.

THE GLENCOE

On the 3rd day of April 1852, the Glencoe, Captain Lee, from New Orleans, arrived at St. Louis, and had just been moored at the levee, foot of Chestnut street, when three of the boilers exploded, with the most appalling and destructive effects. The sound of the explosion was heard in the most remote quarters of the city; in the neighborhood of the levee the shock was like that of an earthquake, the houses for several squares around appeared to reel under the force of the concussion. The boat was crowded with people at the time; the passengers were engaged in looking after their baggage, and numbers of citizens, hotel-runners, hackmen, had pressed into the boat. There was a fearful loss of life, but the names and number of the killed are beyond the scope of inquiry, as many of the victims were strangers; the bodies of a large number blown overboard were not recovered from the water, and many of the dead were so shockingly disfigured or torn to pieces that all recognition was out of the question. Fragments of wood, iron, and dead bodies were thrown to a surprising distance.

The shock of the explosion drove the steamer far out into the river, and immediately afterwards she took fire, the furnaces having been dismantled, and the burning fuel scattered over the decks. As the Glencoe floated down the stream, she presented a frightful spectacle. The whole forward part of the boat to the wheel-house, and down to the water line, had been swept away, and all the after-part was a commingled mass of timbers, freight, and human bodies heaped together in the wildest confusion. The fire burned fiercely and spread rapidly. The spectators on the shore beheld men, women and children running, with phrensied gestures, from one part of the burning steamer to another, seeking some means of escape from the dreadful death which threatened them. Some who had been caught between the falling timbers were writhing in agony, making ineffectual efforts to extricate themselves, and imploring others to assist them. Numbers of the crew and passengers were compelled by the advancing flames to throw themselves overboard; some of these succeeded in reaching the shore, but many of them were drowned.

In the meantime, several small boats were actively engaged in rescuing the drowning people, and a considerable number were saved in this manner. The wreck finally lodged at the foot of Poplar Street, where it burned to the water's edge, and then sunk, carrying down with it the ashes and bones of the dead. Near the spot where the explosion took place many dead bodies and dying persons were extended on the levee. Thirteen mutilated corpses were soon after removed to the office of the Board of Health, that being the most convenient place where they could be deposited. Twenty or thirty of the wounded were conveyed to the Sisters' Hospital. Others who were less

injured, some with their faces scalded or blackened by the fire, were running about the levee in a frantic manner, crying for assistance. The dead bodies of five persons who had been blown from the deck of the Glencoe were found on the steamer Cataract. They were dreadfully mangled, the limbs in some cases being torn from the trunk—heads were mashed and disfigured to a degree which defied all attempts at identification. The body of a woman was found on the levee stretched across a marble slab, (the top of a table which had also been blown from the boat); every bone in this corpse was broken, and "the limbs," says an eye-witness," were so badly mangled that they could scarcely hang together."

The body of Mr. John Denny, first clerk of the Glencoe, was found on the hurricane deck of the steamer Western World. Few external injuries were found on this body, but life was totally extinct. The body of a little girl, with the legs torn off, was recovered from the river. The dissevered leg of a man was picked up on the sidewalk in Commercial Street; the boot which remained on the limb, led to the recognition thereof as a part of the mortal remains of William Brennan, one of the engineers. Of the thirteen wounded persons who were sent to the hospital, three died during the night, and scarcely any of the others were believed to be curable.

Capt. Lee, his lady and one of his children, left the boat as soon as she landed, and a very few minutes before the explosion. The Captain's little son, ten years of age, who remained on board, was killed. Mr. A. R. Jones, a merchant of St. Louis, was instrumental in saving a great number of lives. He obtained a yawl and approached the burning boat near enough to take off a great many passengers. As an acknowledgment of his humane services in the time of danger and affliction, the steamboat men of St. Louis presented Mr. Jones with a handsome silver mug, bearing a suitable inscription.

LIST OF THE KILLED.—John Denny, first clerk of the Glencoe; Henry Balsar, pilot; John Curtis Lee, son of the Captain, aged ten years; Edward McCarty, hack driver, St. Louis; Mrs. Schenil, passenger, Memphis, Tenn.; (every bone in her body was broken, as mentioned in the preceding narrative ;) John Grey, aged 12 years, a pedlar boy, from Memphis; William Brennan, assistant engineer; a family, consisting of a man, his wife and three female children, names unknown; George W. Rolfe, runner at the American Hotel, St. Louis; David Cree, Belfast, Ireland; George Reeder and James Wile, runners at the Virginia Hotel; a woman, name unknown; and many others, whose bodies could not be identified; making a total of sixty killed.

BADLY WOUNDED.—William Callahan, fireman; Jesse H. Harrington, passenger, Cook county, Ill.; Samuel High, a citizen of St. Louis, who went on board after the boat arrived ; Thomas Carroll, passenger, Liverpool, England; Frederick W. Burlog, German emigrant: Thomas Donahoe, Dubuque, Iowa; Patrick McLaughlin, New York ; Daniel B. Henman, Gibson county, Ill.; James McLean, Ohio; Michael Dunn, one of the boat's crew; Sarah Matthews, passenger, aged thirteen, mortally wounded ; W. B. Catherwright, passenger, Mississippi ; William Brathwed, an Englishman; (he had with him $1,900 in specie;) George Buchanan, engineer.

SLIGHTLY WOUNDED.—Mr. Lane, bar-keeper ; Mr. Studdiford, Ohio; Francis Cafferty, hotel runner; Thomas Foley, assistant engineer.

Very few of those who were badly wounded lived twenty-four hours after the accident. In addition to those mentioned in the foregoing list, some of the wounded were conveyed away by their friends, and their names were not ascertained.

Two or three steamboats which lay near the Glencoe, were much damaged by the explosion. A lady from Illinois was killed in her state - room in the steamer Cataract, which lay next to the Glencoe.

THE SALUDA

The Saluda exploded on Missouri river, near Lexington, April 9th, 1852. It appears that this boat had been detained in the neighborhood of Lexington for four days, by a strong tide. Several of her passengers left her to seek other conveyance. On the day above mentioned, the Captain made another effort to stem the current. The steamer left the landing at half past one o'clock, A. M., and five minutes after, the boilers exploded with such tremendous effect that the cabin and all the wood-work forward of the wheel-house were completely demolished, and not a piece of timber was left above the guards. The boat sunk within a few minutes. The books were all lost, and the names of all the passengers who were killed by the explosion or who sunk with the boat could not be ascertained. The number of those who perished is estimated at one hundred.

The commander, Capt. Belt, who was on the hurricane roof, was blown high in the air, and fell against the side of a hill in Lexington, at least one hundred feet from the wreck. The second clerk, Mr. John Blackburn, was standing on the boiler-deck, and was also blown on shore, to a considerable distance from the boat. He was taken up dead. It may be mentioned as a melancholy coincidence, that a brother of this gentleman, (E. C. Blackburn,) was killed by the accident on the Pacific railroad in November 1855. They were both highly esteemed by all who knew them. The mutilated bodies of a large number of the passengers of the Saluda were found in the streets of Lexington. Charles Labarge and Louis Gareth, the pilots, and Messrs. Clancy and Evans, the engineers, were lost. Their bodies were blown into the river, and were never recovered. One of the surviving passengers lost his wife and seven children. A lady was deprived of her husband and three children. Such was the force of the explosion, that a part of the boiler passed through a warehouse on the wharf, and quite demolished it. The citizens of Lexington subscribed $1,000 for the relief of the sufferers. The accident is ascribed to the negligence of the engineer.

At any rate, travel by steamboat would not have been possible for Heinrich and Maria if they traveled in early spring of 1854, as we believe they did, because the Mississippi River was frozen so solid that winter that an enterprising saloon keeper set up business in the middle of the river, as reported on January 17, 1854. Therefore river travel by boat would have been impossible for Heinrich and Maria. However, a frozen Mississippi River meant that they might simply drive their oxen team and covered wagon over that river, which is what they may have done. We must remember that the Mississippi in the Burlington and Dubuque areas was much wider and shallower in those days, before the lock and dam systems were installed there in the 1930s. Amazingly enough, the vast Mississippi River has frozen over completely a number of times, including the year 1899, when the weather was so bitterly cold that the river froze for its entire length, all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. There were even “ice chunks flowing into the Gulf.” The Mississippi was frozen to a depth of 13 inches in Cairo, Illinois, two inches in New Orleans, and one inch thick at the entrance to the Gulf. I was nine years old and heard talk about the freeze. According to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Mississippi River has frozen completely in St. Louis at least ten times between 1831 and 1938, before the completion of the Alton Lock and Dam.

The photo above of a woman walking across the Mississippi River near St. Louis was taken in February 1905. The Eads Bridge behind her, connecting St. Louis, Missouri to East St. Louis, Illinois, was the world's first all steel bridge, taking seven years to build and opening in 1874, 30 years before this photo was taken. The two coldest winters in St. Louis were 1904-1905 and 1977-1978. The coldest temperature recorded in St. Louis was -25 degrees F. on February 13, 1905. The highest temperature recorded in St. Louis was 113.4 degrees F. on July 14, 1954.

Here is an article in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* in 2017:

Yes, it's cold this week, the coldest it's been here in St. Louis in several years. What's particularly galling is that this cold is not as lovely and refreshing as we thought it would be last summer when the thermometer crawled up to 108. (Remember that?)

Back in the good old days before global warming, it got this cold a lot. The cold was enough to stop even the mighty Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Cakes of ice would jam the Mississippi from the confluence to as far south as Cape Girardeau. And then St. Louisans would go out on the river to play.

Mere ice skating was considered passe. Anyway, as the *Post-Dispatch* reported during the freeze of January 1910,

“The ice floor of the river is not smooth but is covered with irregular ice peaks and miniature bergs, parts of the ice jam that were caught by the freezing of the surface and were cemented together in a mass. Those going across stumble up inclines to jagged plateaus and then slide down into little valleys. The trip on foot across the river will tax the strength of an able man.

That didn't stop many from going anyway, some for the adventure, some because of rumors of a free chicken dinner in Cahokia. Some carried sticks, held horizontally so that if they fell through the ice, the ends would (in theory) catch and keep them from falling through. (This theory, fortunately, was never tested, or at least the reporter from the *P-D* never heard about it.)

During the previous freeze, back in 1905, a few enterprising souls had set up illegal gambling operations on the ice. Recalled A. W. Long of the Harbor Department,

The confidence men planted their gambling apparatus in the middle of the river and the police could not touch them.”

If this freezing weather continues, we will probably have the same thing this winter. The women might hold their euchre parties out there now since Chief Creecy has begun a campaign against them.

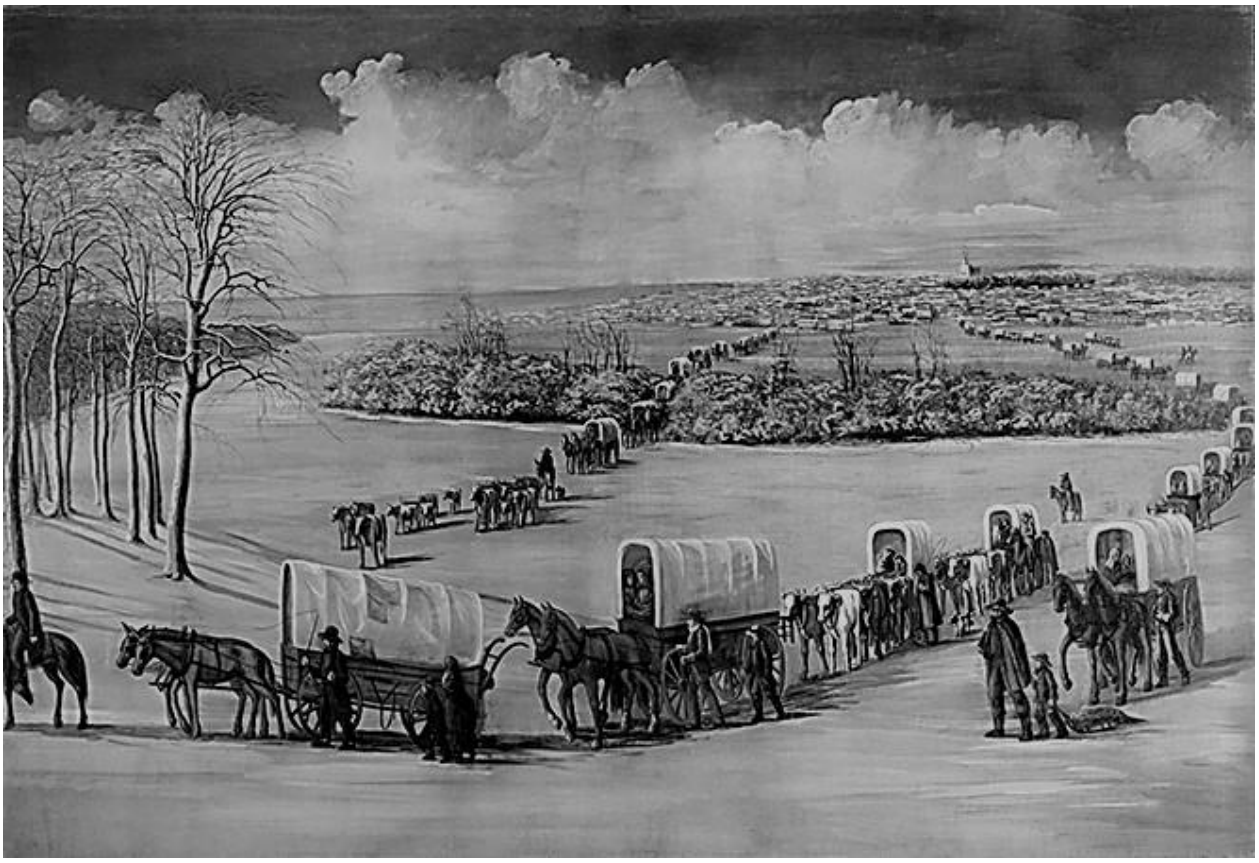
This was one of the few cheerful news stories about the freezing of the river. There were many, many more heart-rending accounts of poor unfortunates (mostly hobos and alcoholics) who had frozen to death and subsequently had to be carved out of blocks of ice and identified at the city morgue.”

The river froze at least ten times between 1831 and 1938. The ice jams stopped not because the weather magically got warmer, but because of the construction of the Alton Lock and Dam, which stopped icebergs from flowing south down the Mississippi and blocking the city's water pipes. The river still freezes sometimes.

The following photos of the frozen Mississippi River were taken in 1936.

Heinrich and Maria would have looked for or been directed to a section of the river that had frozen over more smoothly, perhaps like the 1936 photo on the left here, so an oxen team and covered wagon could navigate it. Of course, the risk of animals and people slipping on the ice and falling and breaking a leg was increased with smooth ice. A layer of snow deep enough for traction would be ideal.

A painting by Grant Romney Clawson called *The Saints Crossing the Mississippi* (LDS.org), photo below, shows members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints crossing the frozen Mississippi with oxen teams. In the 1820s in New York State Joseph Smith had started a new religion called the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, or the Mormons. Due to controversies about his beliefs, Smith had to move his church a number of times, eventually building a town called Nauvoo in 1839 in Illinois and settling there. In 1846 violence erupted in Nauvoo as the church split into two factions over the belief that Mormons could have more than one wife. Smith was arrested and put in jail. A mob attacked the jail and killed Smith and his brother. The governor of Illinois ordered the Mormons to leave the state, and Brigham Young became the new leader. He told his people that he had seen their new home in a dream, that it was in a wide, beautiful valley in the West, and that he would recognize it when he saw it. Young led his people out of Illinois in the spring of 1846. There were more than 15,000 Saints at the start of the journey, and many wagons and farm animals. The trip west was hard. Many of the people died, and when the migration was finally completed in 1847, 12,000 remained. Today, the Mormon Trail is a part of the United States National Trails System, known as the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail. The Mormon Trail extends from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Salt Lake City, Utah. It would be interesting to know if my grandparents heard about this Church, and what they must have thought about the scandalous belief that church elders could have multiple wives.



Here is the story of the Saints' trek, as reported in *Our Heritage* by the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints.

The Exodus from Nauvoo had begun on Wednesday, February 4, 1846, when the river was not frozen. Charles Shumwway was the first to ferry across the river. Within a few days, under the direction of Hosea Stout and the Nauvoo Police, the Saints were crossing night and day on any available craft. On February 9 the wind was quite high and the river very rough. As a man and two boys came from one of the river's islands with a load of wood, their skiff began to fill with water and the boys became frightened and screamed loudly. A ferryboat loaded with wagons and oxen approached, and the three were picked up safely. Unfortunately, someone on the ferry spit tobacco or whisky in an ox's eye, and in the ensuing commotion, some bottom planks of the boat were kicked out. Hosea Stout recorded in his journal that as the boat sank, people grabbed on to anything they could – sticks, lumber, beds – and were tossed about at the mercy of the cold waves. Some climbed on top of a wagon that had not gone under. The cows and oxen swam back to shore. Finally an empty boat that was crossing the river picked up the people. No one was lost, but some were so cold and exhausted they could not speak.

On Tuesday, February 24, 1846, two weeks after the first crossing, the river froze over, something it usually did not do, and the next morning Charles C. Rich walked across. Though the ice was slippery, it supported wagons and teams and made the crossing easier. But the cold weather caused much suffering as the Saints plodded through the snow. In the encampment at Sugar Creek on the other side of the river, a steady wind blew snow that fell to a depth of almost eight inches. Then a thaw caused the ground to become muddy. Around, above, and below, the

elements combined to produce a miserable environment for the 2000 Saints huddled in tents, wagons, and hastily erected shelters while they waited for the command to continue on.

Now I think we are ready to put together the last information that will help us decide how Heinrich and Maria probably took their overland trip. Before we do that, though, I think it is important to put the whole pioneer experience in perspective. There seems to have grown up around the concept of "pioneer" a romance and mystique wholly out of proportion to the reality of the actual pioneer experience. There is a tendency to glorify the heroism of pioneers. Yes, heroism was part of the experience, but not that much more, perhaps, than the heroism of so many of us in more modern times who are simply trying to live our lives. Professor Madison wrote the following essay based on a talk he gave at the Indiana Statehood Day celebration co-sponsored by the Indiana Historical Bureau and the Indiana Historical Society on December 10, 1995, reported in *In.gov/history:*

We need to understand pioneers as ordinary people behaving in ordinary ways for their time and place, not heroic conquerors of wilderness and builders of civilization. They were not extra-humans with uncommon virtue or courage or brilliance. They were not superheroes. Their most human qualities come through in one of the driving ambitions of pioneers. They did not want to be pioneers. They wanted to become something else, to move beyond that stage. They wanted to live in frame houses, not drafty and damp log cabins. They wanted an iron cook stove, not a fireplace. They wanted store bought nails, coffee, sugar, cloth, and on and on. To be a successful pioneer was to be on the way toward something else, as quickly as possible. In this they were ordinary people.

To celebrate them as heroic demigods does a disservice to their humanity. And it places an impossible burden on us to live up to their imaginary achievements and mythic greatness. And thereby it sets us up for disillusionment and distrust, for cynicism and whining about our own times.

If we can see pioneers succeeding and failing and if we can understand the ambiguity and complexity of their lives, then we do justice to them and to ourselves and perhaps to the generations to come which will write the history of our times. Here is my final point. If I am right that these were ordinary people, if I'm right that their lives were filled with ambiguity, if I'm right that we go wrong when we celebrate them as superheroes, then is there nothing we can learn from pioneers? Is there no pioneer legacy?

I think there is. First, I think we learn from pioneer Hoosiers the wisdom of nurturing a common sense appropriate to time and place. Second, we learn to respect the difference between their time and ours, without denigrating their time or our time. A one-room log cabin made sense in 1830; a computer makes sense in 1996. More important, I think we can learn optimism from pioneers.

Sure there were pessimists among them. But the generation that pioneered in Indiana was above all optimistic: optimistic that things could be better and that they could collectively help things get better.

The best example of that generalization is the Internal Improvements Act of 1836. It is the most daring and optimistic piece of legislation ever passed by the Indiana General Assembly. The legislature in 1836 authorized three major canal projects, the Central Canal, Whitewater, and Wabash & Erie extension. There was to be a macadamized road from New Albany to Vincennes. And most exciting, a railroad, running from Madison on the Ohio to Indianapolis to Lafayette. To finance this grand public works project Indiana borrowed ten million dollars at five percent interest, this at a time when state revenue was about $120,000 a year. Hoosier pioneers eagerly looked forward to a transportation network that would connect them to the outside world. Farmers, merchants, and travellers would move from cabins and villages to the market places of the nation and even the world. The legislature authorized this mammoth system in spite of pioneers' professions of preference for small government, no taxes, independence, and self-sufficiency. And they did so because they believed so strongly in the future. Now we know they failed. In the short run, at least, the system of 1836 went bankrupt and created a large embarrassment for Indiana. The pioneer generation often failed. But optimists know failure. And despite failure this pioneer generation flourished on the strong base of optimism.

It is the spark and spunk of this generation that excites me, not their superhuman heroism. Despite a keen sense of limits they planned for change and believed in progress. Despite evidence that much could go wrong, they hoped much more would go right. That way of thinking is their legacy for us.

Some might be thinking that was then. The times are different in the 1990s. We know real limits, we understand failure, we seek shelter. We can't do it all. We must cut, not build. Perhaps. But I would suggest a different legacy--one of optimism, one that celebrates Indiana's best traditions, from the Constitution of 1816 to our own time, not a mindless or heroic celebration, but one more ambiguous, one that gives a real base on which to build rather than romantic myths and legends. Our pioneer legacy comes from a people far more ambiguous and far more interesting than those heroic myths.

So, as the twentieth century moves to an end, I'll look back to the Constitution of 1816 and to the Hoosier pioneers and hope for the future of Indiana into the twenty-first century.