



*Grant Marsh*

## Dakota Images

Grant Marsh, born in Rochester, Pennsylvania, in 1834, ran away from home at age twelve to become a steamboat cabin boy. Years later, he would be known as the best steamboat captain on the unpredictable upper Missouri River, capable, some said, of "piloting a paddlewheeler over a sea of dew."

Marsh's long career reads like an adventure book. In 1859, he worked on a Mississippi River boat with second pilot Samuel Clemens, later known as author Mark Twain. In 1862, Marsh was on the Tennessee River, serving as mate on a vessel supporting Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's forces at the Battle of Shiloh. By 1866, he had become familiar with every facet of a steamboat's operation and made his first journey as a captain up the Missouri to Fort Benton. He held the *Luella* there until fall, risking the possibility of being frozen in as he waited for the last gold miners to finish their season's work. The delay paid off, for Marsh's boat returned to Saint Louis with \$1,250,000 in gold dust, the most valuable cargo ever taken downstream.

In 1873, shortly after becoming a captain for the Coulson Packet Line, Marsh moved with his wife and five children to Yankton, Dakota Territory, which would serve as his base of operations for the next ten years. During the Sioux Wars, he piloted steamboats moving army troops and supplies into the Indian country of Wyoming and Montana, surviving ambushes and treacherous waters. He became the first man to explore the Yellowstone River by steamboat and, in 1875, took the *Josephine* 483 miles upstream, the farthest point ever reached by any steamboat on the Yellowstone. Marsh is best remembered for piloting the *Far West*, loaded with soldiers wounded in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, down 710 miles of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers to Fort Abraham Lincoln near Bismarck in a record fifty-four hours.

By 1883, Yankton's days as a major steamboat port were over, and Marsh went to work on the Mississippi once again. Twenty years later, at seventy-one years of age, he returned to the upper Missouri and operated steamboats out of Washburn, North Dakota, for the last portion of his long, distinguished career. Grant Marsh died on 2 January 1916 and is buried in Bismarck, North Dakota.

by JEANNE KILEN ODE

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