The Indians called it the fire canoe, a dragon that walked on water. They stared in awe as the seething, thumping, smoke-breathing *Western Engineer* thrashed and pounded its way against the current of the mighty Missouri River, part of Major Stephen H. Long’s Yellowstone Expedition of 1819. For all practical purposes, Long’s journey was a failure. He was supposed to reach the mouth of the Yellowstone and construct a fort to check British influence on the fur trade, but the *Western Engineer* was the only one of four steamboats to get as far upstream as Council Bluffs, Iowa. However, as a means of impressing the Indians with American strength, the trip was a distinct success. The bow of the *Western Engineer* was deliberately shaped like a huge, scaly serpent, and the Indians talked about it for years to come.¹

Steamboats did not ply the Missouri again until 1831, but when they did, another primary purpose was to impress the Indians with the white man’s power. The American Fur Company’s seventy-five-ton sidewheeler the *Yellowstone* succeeded where Long had failed, reaching Fort Union, the

company's new trading post at the mouth of the Yellowstone River. Aboard were a twelve-pound cannon and several eight-pound swivel guns that were discharged with frightful effect near every Indian village. According to artist George Catlin, the natives were so confused and terrified that they frequently shot their horses and dogs in an effort to appease the Great Spirit. Those who did not desert the village for higher ground got a still greater shock—a sudden blast of steam from the escape pipe that sent men, women, children, and dogs tumbling over one another in retreat.2

Within a decade steamboats became so common on the Missouri that the Indians were no longer frightened. The famous naturalist John James Audubon, aboard the Omega in 1843, wrote that the natives ran along the riverbank like children following a street parade each time the boat left a village.3 The steamboat had become the principal source for the necessities of life for many tribes of the Upper Missouri. What they failed to realize was that the steamers also brought the things that would destroy their way of life—disease, liquor, government annuities, and unscrupulous Indian agents. In the end they would bring soldiers, guns, and cannons.

Of the many adverse ways in which the steamboat affected the Indians, none was deadlier than the unintentional introduction of diseases. Cholera came to the Yellowstone in 1833, part of an epidemic that raged throughout the nation, and it broke out again in 1849.4 Fearful white communities along the Missouri refused to let steamboats drop anchor at times, and ships with no cases of cholera aboard refused to answer pleas for help from those that did. In 1837 it was smallpox that decimated the natives after the disease broke out among crew members on the American Fur Company's ship Saint Peter's. The Indians were warned to stay off the boat, but they came aboard anyway and contacted the dreaded pox. At

Fort Clark a Mandan stole a blanket that was infected with the disease, and at Fort Union the decision of a company commander to vaccinate the Indians boomeranged to spread it further. Twenty-seven of the thirty who were vaccinated died within twenty-four hours. The infected survivors fled, carrying the pox so widely that by late summer some seventeen thousand Blackfeet, Assiniboines, Mandans, Arikaras, Crows, and Sioux had died. More effectively than by force of arms, diseases had opened the way for the white man’s penetration of the Upper Missouri and the steamboat had helped make it possible.  

Steamers also brought death and debauchery in the form of the white man’s firewater, even though there was a federal law of 1832 that prohibited its shipment into Indian country. Hiram Martin Chittenden, a foremost authority on steamboat navigation of the Missouri, maintained that the American Fur Company would gladly have abided by the law if the government could have prevented small traders from bringing liquor into the region. But there was no way of stopping the operators who came on foot, and liquor soon became the one indispensable item when doing business with the Indians. It was smuggled up the Missouri continuously aboard steamboats and sold at an incredible profit to the very Indians it helped destroy.

At first government inspectors were very strict in searching for liquor aboard steamers. Maximilian, Prince of Wied, complained in 1833 of not being permitted to keep enough liquor aboard the Yellowstone to preserve his specimens of natural history. But the traders found ways of getting around the federal law. The American Fur Company operated its own distillery at Fort Union and instructed its steamboat captains not to load too heavily at Saint Louis, so that a few hundred...
bushels of corn could be placed on board at Council Bluffs. From there it came to Fort Union to be made into liquor. When the Superintendent of Indian Affairs General William Clark asked the company for an explanation of its activities, its officials denied having violated the liquor law. Nothing was being done, they said, other than conducting a few experiments in making wine from wild pears and berries.

By 1843 government inspectors had become so lenient that the fur company rarely had difficulty getting liquor shipped to its posts. On one occasion that year the captain of the Omega had kegs of liquor moved about in the darkness of the hold while the inspector was kept "in a most excellent temper" by sampling the private stock of Audubon. More subterfuge than that was needed in 1844 to get the Nimrod past the inspection of an ex-Methodist minister, Joseph Miller, at Bellevue Agency. Miller boasted that no liquor could get past him; and he broke open packages, pierced bales of cotton, and unfolded blankets looking for the "poison," but to no avail. The Nimrod's shipment of liquor had been stored in barrels of flour and already had been rolled off into company warehouses before Miller searched the ship. The flour was quietly reloaded after midnight, and the Nimrod pulled away at 3:00 A.M. When he realized what had happened, the inspector threatened government action. Unfortunately, the captain of the ship never could be found as a witness for the United States attorney, and finally, the case was compromised through the influence of Thomas Hart Benton. It was not the only time that the Missouri senator aided the American Fur Company in its illegal liquor traffic with the Indians, so the company honored him in 1850 by naming its most important post Fort Benton.

There are many recorded incidents to indicate that steamboats carried liquor to the Indians as long as they traveled the Upper Missouri. In the case of the Chippewa in 1861, deck hands started a fire in the hold when they lit a candle to tap a

case of whiskey, and the boat exploded at Disaster Bend near the mouth of the Poplar River when the blaze reached kegs of gunpowder. On two occasions in 1862 liquor was served openly to Indians aboard the Emilie: agency Sioux were entertained with whiskey at Yankton and at Fort Benton more firewater was served to Little Dog and the Piegan Blackfeet.\(^9\) In 1864 steamboat captains included a large consignment of liquor on ships supplying General Alfred Sully. The captains used it as payment for wood that was purchased daily from “woodhawks” along the river, and the woodcutters in turn traded the liquor to the Indians for an immense profit. Even ordinary travelers profited in the illegal whiskey shipment to Indians. In 1872 a Dr. Walsh of Jackson, Michigan, was discovered with liquor disguised as a box of eggs and a barrel of dried apples. Finally, as late as 1881, during the declining years of steamboat activity on the Upper Missouri, there was evidence that the liquor trade with the Indians continued. In that year the Peninah was confiscated by the government and the owners of the boat lost their licenses to trade at Fort Peck, Fort Berthold, and Cheyenne River because crewmen sold liquor to reservation Indians.\(^10\)

The extensive use of the steamboat in the government’s Indian annuities program affected sixteen different tribes at one time or another, and the business remained sizeable into the 1880s. Shippers of annuities reaped profits second only to those who held military contracts. Heads of major companies lobbied in Washington for the financially rewarding annuities traffic. One man who was successful at cultivating the generals, congressmen, and steamboat inspectors necessary to obtain annuities business was Sanford B. Coulson of the Missouri River Transportation Company.\(^11\) Such political intrigue was at least partially responsible for the corruption and fraud often


associated with Indian annuities. In case after case the annuities never reached their intended beneficiaries before a third or more of them were concealed within company warehouses, there to be mixed with goods traded to the natives. The value of annuities generally was from fifty thousand dollars to seventy-five thousand dollars per shipment, but Hiram Chittenden estimated that from 1850 to 1870 the tribes of the Upper Missouri never received more than half that amount of goods from any boat.\textsuperscript{12} It is doubtful that the percentage increased thereafter. W. F. Kountz, one of Coulson’s competitors, accused the Missouri River Transportation Company of stealing half the goods intended for the Grand River Agency in 1873, and in 1875 the \textit{Bismarck Tribune} accused officers of the \textit{Silver Lake} of misappropriating annuities that were headed for Fort Berthold.\textsuperscript{13}

Steamboat captains aware of the collusion between Indian agents and the trading companies were concerned, primarily because of the bloodshed that often resulted. The incident of the \textit{Robert Campbell} and the Tobacco Garden Massacre of 1863 is a case in point. The \textit{Robert Campbell} carried annuities for the Sioux, Crows, Blackfeet, and Assiniboines. When it reached Fort Pierre, the Sioux were waiting patiently to receive their share, even though the steamer was forty-two days late in arriving. Imagine the consternation of the Indians when agents Henry W. Reed and Samuel M. Latta refused to release more than two-thirds of the goods intended for them. The Sioux appealed to Captain Joseph La Barge for help, but he was powerless before the agents’ authority. Understandably angry and not at all deceived by what was going on, the Indians followed the \textit{Robert Campbell} for six hundred miles toward Fort Union in an effort to destroy the boat. They were waiting at Tobacco Garden, a bottoms area at Tobacco Creek some eighty-eight miles below Fort Union, when the \textit{Campbell} and the \textit{Shreveport} pulled into sight. Once again they demanded

\textsuperscript{12} Chittenden, \textit{History of Early Steamboat Navigation}, pp. 300, 361.

their full share of annuities, and again the agents refused. Instead, they sent a yawl and seven men to bring the chiefs aboard for a talk. The Indians attacked the craft and the steamboats opened fire with two howitzers, killing eighteen Sioux and wounding many more.

La Barge moved his boat on to the mouth of the Yellowstone where shallow water prevented further progress. There the Assiniboines received their share of the annuities, but those intended for the Crows and Blackfeet, along with the illegally held goods for the Sioux, were stored by the American Fur Company at Fort Union until the following spring. Company agent William Hodgkiss gave La Barge a receipt for the items, and it was witnessed by army Captain W. B. Greer. But when spring came and La Barge returned on the *Effie Deans* to pick up and deliver the annuities, he did not find them. A new agent claimed that the supplies already had been delivered to the Indians under orders from Indian Commissioner Dole,
but he could produce neither a signed receipt from the tribes nor a copy of the order from Dole.  

La Barge called the "lamentable affair" an outright theft from the government of goods worth nearly twenty thousand dollars and said that the incident "was one of the many crimes which must forever lie at the door of the Department of Indian Affairs in Washington." Here was an agent, La Barge continued, who gave every evidence of being in collusion with the American Fur Company. He had retained a third of the annuities due the Indians and stored them in the company warehouse, from which they never reached the Indians except in exchange for robes and other private merchandise. La Barge presented the case personally to President Abraham Lincoln, who promptly called the proper Indian Department official to hear the accusation. The official insisted that receipts for the annuities had been signed by Indian chiefs in the presence of American Fur Company personnel. La Barge countered that the receipts, if they existed at all, were false, but he had no proof and there the matter ended.

Human depravity was not the only thing that prevented Missouri River steamboats from delivering annuities to the tribes in full. At times during the Civil War secessionists successfully blockaded the river and virtually snuffed out the flow of supplies to Indian agencies. The currency problems of the country also cost the Indians dearly, for as money depreciated and prices went up, the quantity of annuities that could be purchased shrank accordingly.

Poor government planning and the nature of the Missouri River itself were other factors that contributed to the Indians' general disillusionment with the annuity system. Spring was the best time for steamboats to leave from downriver ports, because


15. Ibid., p. 312.

16. Ibid., p. 342-43.

the water was high and there was less danger of being stranded on sand bars or of striking fatal snags. It also was the time of year when Indian agencies needed to augment depleted winter supplies. Often, however, steamers had to wait for railroad shipments to arrive until long after it was safe to ascend the river, and sometimes it was August before cargoes were ready to be moved up the Missouri. In 1868 it was 15 October before Captain Grant Marsh left Saint Louis with annuities aboard the Nile. Because the government had just completed new agreements with the Sioux, it insisted that Marsh make an effort to reach the Grand River Agency, about eighty-six miles below Fort Rice. The captain expressed grave doubts about being able to travel that far on the sluggish Missouri so late in the year, and his judgment proved correct. The river was extremely low,

progress was slow, and the Nile could not make it to Grand River. When shallow water threatened to stop the boat about one hundred forty miles above Fort Randall, part of the cargo was put off on Cul-de-Sac Island. Later, the rest was unloaded at Cheyenne River Agency because ice began forming in the Missouri. Marsh headed the Nile back to Saint Louis, but near the present town of Chamberlain, the ice won out and forced the crew to endure a Dakota winter aboard the boat. There is no indication that the annuities intended for the Grand River Agency ever reached their destination.  

Officials in Washington often talked about correcting injustices in the annuities system. Secretary of War Edward M. Stanton claimed in 1865 that “many abuses have been reformed and great economies effected” in the shipment of goods to the Indians by steamboat, but the preponderance of evidence indicates that such supplies never arrived in their entirety so long as the program existed. Lieutenant General William T. Sherman called upon Congress in 1868 to appropriate the necessary money for annuities at least a year in advance to insure their being shipped during the navigable season of the Missouri River. Yet, as late as 1876 the Indian agents continued to complain about “the non-arrival of supplies,” and the commissioner of Indian affairs said it was because the annual appropriation bill did not pass Congress until 15 August.

The Indians found it difficult to understand the Great White Father’s ability to meet the needs of the soldiers and his inability to provide the promised annuities. They could not distinguish between the dishonest agents and the government

that employed them. They did not understand why the white man’s Civil War should affect the quantity of goods they had been promised, nor why the steamboats too often failed to arrive when the river was high and the travel was good. They perceived only that the fire canoe, an instrument of power in the hands of the white man’s government, could have supplied them with the necessities of life and yet often did not. Consequently, it was “the government” that the Indians held responsible for all the bad faith, broken promises, poor planning, and outright exploitation associated with the annuities system.

The steamboat was directly related to the Indian wars of the Upper Missouri that began after the Sioux uprising in Minnesota in 1862 and continued with growing intensity until 1877. Several factors conspired to pacify the western Sioux until 1863. General Harney’s victory at Ash Hollow in 1855, the Indians’ faith in the treaties Harney negotiated, and the presence of the army at Fort Randall were enough to keep the peace until the Sioux grew weary of being systematically defrauded by government agents and white traders who came up the Missouri River. Then, as if the injustices of the annuities program were not enough reason to send the Indians on the warpath, the steamboat suddenly began bringing hordes of white men up the river during the Montana-Idaho gold rush.

The series of gold discoveries that began at Bannack in 1862 and continued until the Last Chance Gulch strike of 1864 brought the steamboat its greatest days on the Upper Missouri. A flood of miners and emigrants descended upon Fort Benton, the head of navigation some twenty-three hundred miles from Saint Louis and only two hundred miles overland from the mines. The number of ships that came as far upriver as Fort Benton never numbered more than half a dozen a year prior to the gold rush. When the traffic to the mines neared its peak in 1866, there were thirty-one arrivals, and in 1867 there were thirty-nine boats that brought more than eight thousand tons of freight and more than ten thousand passengers.23 Some light-draft steamers could make two round trips in a season, but even one trip to Fort Benton and back was worthwhile.

Passenger fares alone made the business profitable. Steamboats to Fort Benton grossed over one million five hundred thousand dollars in 1867 on traffic that averaged about one hundred fifty dollars per passenger, and one trip back to Saint Louis often carried almost that much money in gold dust. When the Luella left Fort Benton in 1866, she carried two hundred miners and more than one million two hundred fifty thousand dollars in gold—the most valuable cargo ever carried on the Missouri. The addition of freight charges added to steamboat profits that ranged in 1866 from a modest seventeen thousand dollars for the Saint John to an enormous sixty-five thousand dollars for the Peter Balen.24

At the same time they sustained the tide of miners to Montana, the steamboats gave invaluable assistance to the army when it was called upon to subdue an Indian nation understandably angry over still another encroachment by white men into forbidden territory. Steamers had been used in increasing numbers up to 1860 for transporting troops and supplies on the Lower Missouri.25 General Harney used them extensively in his campaign of 1855 to protect emigrant routes


against the Sioux, but after the Montana gold rush, the boats assumed even greater military importance.

The steamboat’s military service in the Upper Missouri Indian wars began during General John Pope’s two-pronged attack of 1863-64 against remnants of the Minnesota Sioux when they fled to their Dakota relatives. An army column under General H. H. Sibley drove the Sioux from Mankato toward the Missouri River, while a second unit under General Alfred Sully was supposed to move north from Sioux City and cut off the retreating Indians. The operation failed because low water on the Missouri detained boats carrying Sully’s supplies. It allowed the Sioux to escape to the west bank, and cold weather suspended the activity of the army until 1864. Sully garrisoned his troops at a new post, Fort Sully, about four miles below Pierre. The supplies had come by steamboat.26

The following spring several steamers transported more supplies up the Missouri for another assault on the Sioux, but once again low water slowed down operations. Snags and sand bars made “grasshoppering” and “double-tripping” even more necessary than usual, and the steamboats failed to arrive before July. They transported Sully’s wintered troops 240 miles to the mouth of the Cannon Ball River where a new base, Fort Rice, was established on the west bank. From there Sully and 2,000 soldiers, mostly cavalry, headed west in search of the hostiles while the steamers continued up the river. They were supposed to reach a point 50 miles above the mouth of the Yellowstone where another fort was to be built and fresh supplies picked up.

Sully defeated the Indians at Kildeer Mountain on 28 July, but by the time his exhausted army staggered into the appointed meeting place with the steamboats on 12 August, they looked more like the conquered than conquerors. He had taken only enough supplies for three weeks and would have been reduced to near starvation if the boats had not made it up the Yellowstone. Fortunately, the Alone and the Chippewa Falls were there, though with barely enough stores to subsist Sully on a return march to Fort Rice. A third boat, the Island City, its hold filled with corn for the horses, barreled pork for the men, and construction materials for the fort, never made it

to the rendezvous. It struck a snag near Fort Union and sank. Low water made a nightmare of the trip back to Fort Rice, for Sully’s men not only had to march much of the way, but also had to carry the cargoes in wagons and literally drag the steamers over sand bars and rapids.  

Sully used fifteen different steamboats at various times during his campaign, sometimes impressing the ships and their captains into military service. He seized the *Shreveport* in 1863 on its way back to Saint Louis and forced it to remain on the Upper Missouri as an army supply boat. Its skipper, Captain Joseph La Barge, worked continuously for six months with no more than five hours of sleep each night. Sully also commandeered the *Chippewa Falls*, the ship that later helped save Sully’s men from starvation on the Yellowstone. The boat was headed for the gold fields when Sully stopped it and ordered its passengers and freight transferred to a sister ship, the *Cutter*. His actions were not unusual. An army officer was at liberty to hail the first boat that came along, if he needed it for military purposes, and to keep it in service as long as necessary. He also had the authority to intervene in labor strikes that sometimes plagued Upper Missouri steamboats, especially at distant points like Fort Buford where it was difficult to replace striking deck hands. If strikers delayed delivery of military supplies, the officer could order soldiers to help with the unloading or he could protect new hands from the wrath of the strikers. Confiscated steamers were paid well by the army. Prevailing rates for boats in government service ran from $300 to $350 per diem, although they became exorbitant when the Montana gold trade boomed and put steamboats at a premium. Several boats earned as high as $530 per diem in 1866, and one received $600.  


31. Hanson, *The Conquest of the Missouri*, pp. 94-95, 368.
The Sully campaign was ineffective in pacifying the Sioux, so in 1864 the government tried the usual approach after a military failure. It sent a peace commission up the Missouri aboard the steamer Ben Johnson. Like almost everything else the government tried with Indian relations, the commission’s efforts did very little good and considerable harm. The captain of the boat complained that the trip was more a pleasure voyage for the commissioners than a serious attempt to deal with the Sioux. They arose late each morning, played cards all day, ordered the captain to make long stops at interesting points, ate the choicest of foods, and insisted on stopping early each evening. Tons of presents intended for the Indians were never unpackaged. In fact, the commissioners talked with very few Indians. When the Ben Johnson arrived back at Sioux City, the captain was awakened at night by the sound of cargo being moved ashore. Supposedly the freight was being moved at the commission’s order, but the secrecy with which it was done convinced the captain that it was an outright theft. He considered it “prima facie evidence that the merchandise ... was on its way to disappearance, to be sold for the private enrichment of one or more ... trusted servants” of the government.

Indian hostility increased during the 1860s in direct proportion to the increase of emigration to Montana. After they had shut off the Bozeman Road for all practical purposes by 1866, they directed their attacks all along the Missouri River with repeated assaults on forts and steamboats from Fort Benton to Fort Union. Still, the river was the safest way to reach Montana from the East and rewards for shipping on the Upper Missouri were too great not to take the risks. So steamer business peaked in the years of 1866-67 in spite of the heavy Indian resistance. Usually it was more troublesome than effectual, the Indians centering their raids on the forts because they realized that men, material, and provisions had been transported into the country and could not be replaced except

at great cost. Attacking a decaying cottonwood fort manned by soldiers disgusted with their miserable, lonely, rat-infested quarters was much simpler than attacking a moving steamboat. It also was much better psychological warfare.

To destroy a fire canoe, the Indians either had to wait until a boat hit a sand bar or its crew came ashore to collect wood. If the attack came when a boat was “grasshoppering” over a sand bar, the captain sent his passengers to the pilot house or “texas” deck to return fire until the deck hands could free the ship. 35 As a precaution, nearly all pilot houses were armed with boiler iron, with only peep holes to see through, and the boats carried howitzers along with standing arms.36 It was easier to attack the steamboats at one of the many woodyards scattered along the sparsely timbered Upper Missouri. The average steamer purchased twenty-five to thirty cords of wood a day for approximately one hundred dollars from “woodhawks” who braved a lonely existence and the wrath of the Indians.37 A boat normally spent from two to three hours taking on wood,38 and if the Indians were not already waiting when a steamer arrived at the woodyard, the chances were good that they would attack before the wooding process was completed. Some captains carried sawmills and had their own oxen to haul whole trees aboard quickly, thus lessening the danger of being attacked. Others carried details of soldiers to help with the wooding.39

From 1868 to 1872 Indian attacks subsided noticeably along the Upper Missouri. By then gold production had declined in Montana, and there was a much safer and direct route to the mines by wagon road from Corrine, Utah, where it connected

35. Hanson, The Conquest of the Missouri, pp. 84-87. Col. D. B. Sackett, who ascended the Missouri in the summer of 1866 to inspect forts above Fort Randall, reported that all were in horrible condition. He said that rats were destroying 1,000 pounds of corn and provisions daily in some places.


with the Union Pacific Railroad. The railroad was completed in the spring of 1870 and, significantly, only eight steamboats arrived at Fort Benton that year. Only six came in 1871.\(^40\) With traffic into their territory thus reduced and with the Treaty of 1868 recognizing their rights to the Black Hills and the valley of the Yellowstone, the tribes remained relatively peaceful until 1872. Then came the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad to Bismarck. The construction of Fort Abraham Lincoln followed, and then the surveying parties laid the path for a new wave of emigration that brought more Indian resistance and more military service for steamboats.

Steamers had taken other expeditions into the Yellowstone country— the Warren Expedition of 1856 and the Hayden Expedition of 1859— and in 1873 they carried still another.\(^41\) Troops, surveyors, and supplies moved up the Yellowstone as far as the mouth of the Powder River on the Peninah, the Far West, the Josephine, and the Key West, all Coulson Packet Company boats. The Key West progressed the farthest, sparring its way to within two miles of the Powder. The expedition provided the army with invaluable information on topography that proved helpful in 1876 when war broke out again with the Sioux.\(^42\)

The hostiles did not attack the government expedition even though it was in territory that had been guaranteed to the Indians by the Treaty of 1868. They resented the incursion, however, and their anger increased in 1874 when Custer led an expedition through the sacred Black Hills. The discovery of gold by miners accompanying Custer set off a new rush into Indian lands. By 1875 it was obvious that another major conflict with the Sioux was not far away, so Lieutenant General P. H. Sheridan ordered one more trip up the Yellowstone River. As usual, the steamboat served with distinction. The Josephine started up the Yellowstone on 25 May with 107 men of the Sixth Infantry and with a command to do military


\(^{42}\) Hanson, *The Conquest of the Missouri*, pp. 149-52, 196.
The greatest story about Upper Missouri steamboats in military service unfolded aboard the Far West during the war against the Sioux in 1876. The commander of the three-pronged attack on the hostiles, General Alfred Terry, chose the ship with special purpose. He liked the fact that the Far West was lighter than most of its sister steamers and yet had ample freight-carrying capacity. He also considered it important that the boat had no “texas” deck. It made the Far West more manageable in the high winds that prevail in North Dakota and

43. Ibid., pp. 214-20.
Montana during the summer. Another determining factor in Terry's selection of the *Far West* was its captain, Grant Marsh, one of the finest navigators of the treacherous Missouri in all its colorful history.

Captain Marsh and his sturdy ship aided Terry's drive against the Sioux in a variety of ways. When the Seventh Cavalry left Fort Lincoln, it carried only enough provisions to last until it reached the Powder River. There the *Far West* met Custer's column with everything necessary to continue the march—oats and bran for the horses, commissary goods, medical supplies, tents and tarps, and ammunition. After delivering these vital supplies, Marsh and the *Far West* were kept constantly on the move. They patrolled the river with an infantry escort, looking for Sioux. They effected a link up of General Terry's forces with those of Colonel John Gibbon. After the boat had served as Terry's headquarters for his last meeting with Custer before the Seventh Cavalry's ride to death at the Little Big Horn, Marsh used it to ferry Gibbon's troops from the Yellowstone's north bank to the south so he could move to an anticipated link up with Custer. Finally, the *Far West* worked its way laboriously up the Big Horn to the mouth of the Little Big Horn where it waited, only fifteen miles from Custer's battleground, until the Crow scout Curley brought the first news of the most publicized military tragedy in the West. In a matter of hours Marsh converted the *Far West* into a hospital ship by covering the deck with a carpet of grass about eighteen inches thick and spreading tarps over it to make an immense mattress. Marsh then sent deck hands to assist the wounded survivors from the Little Big Horn along the trail on a night march back to the steamboat. Fifty-two wounded soldiers and the horse Comanche became hospital patients aboard the *Far West* as Marsh raced the steamer toward Fort Lincoln. Defying an unwritten rule against navigation at night and

44. Chittenden, *History of Early Steamboat Navigation*, pp. 386-88; Havighurst, "Steamboat to the Rockies," p. 269; Hanson, *The Conquest of the Missouri*, p. 238. The first steamboats had only one deck. Later models featured two decks, and then a third deck was added. Atop that was still another addition to the superstructure. It contained quarters for the officers, and river captains nicknamed it the "texas" deck. The pilothouse was located on top of the "texas," giving the captain an unobstructed view of the river, but because of the high winds, it was more a hindrance than help. (Drago, *The Steamboaters*, p. 31).
Steamboat and Indians

moving at top speed down the perilous waters, he reached the
fort in only fifty-four hours at an average speed of more than
thirteen miles per hour. It was a rate never achieved before or
after on the waters of the Upper Missouri.\textsuperscript{45}

Steamboats continued to aid the military conquest of the
Sioux through 1877. Its hospital mission accomplished, the \textit{Far
West} headed back to Powder River country with supplies and
sixty horses to partially remount the Seventh Cavalry. The
\textit{Josephine} already had arrived with some supplies, and further
reinforcements arrived from the East on other boats. The
\textit{Carroll} brought six companies of the Twenty-second Infantry,
and the \textit{E. H. Durfee} brought General Nelson A. Miles and six
companies of the Fifth Infantry. Steamboats also carried
construction materials for new army posts at Fort Keogh, Fort
Custer, and Fort Assiniboine, while still other boats patrolled
the river searching for Indians, conveyed scouts from one shore
to the other, and moved troop detachments up and down the
Yellowstone.\textsuperscript{46}

The steamboat played a coincidental and yet decisive part in
1877 when General Miles forced the surrender of the Nez Perce
Indians near the Canadian border. The Nez Perces already had
crossed the Yellowstone during the final stage of an
unbelievable escape from Idaho along the Lolo Trail, and had it
not been for a steamboat they would have made it to Canada.
The pursuing Miles sent scouts ahead of his column to stop any
boat that might happen along the Yellowstone. As luck had it,
they reached the river just as the last ship of the season was
passing by; fifteen minutes more and it would have been too
late. The steamer stopped, loaded Miles's troops and rations,
and moved them down the river to a point from where the army
ultimately overtook the fleeing Nez Perces.\textsuperscript{47}

Military use of steamboats, like commercial steamboating,
declined along with the growth of railroads and the end of the

\textsuperscript{45} Hanson, \textit{The Conquest of the Missouri}, pp. 241-45, 269-70, 291-312; Lass, \textit{A
History of Steamboating}, p. 123.

\textsuperscript{46} Hanson, \textit{The Conquest of the Missouri}, pp. 323-60; Lass, \textit{A History of
Steamboating}, p. 113.

114.
Indian wars. The steamers served the army briefly in 1880 during a flare-up of fighting in Montana with Sitting Bull's little band of Sioux, and in 1881 a fleet of five steamboats—the Eclipse, the General Terry, the Josephine, the Black Hills, and the Batchelor—transported 3,000 Sioux from Fort Keogh, where Miles had been holding them, to the lower river reservations. When Sitting Bull surrendered in the summer of 1881, another steamboat, the W. J. Behan, conveyed the final group of 181 hostiles to the reservation at Standing Rock.48

Thus ended the steamboat's contacts with Indians of the Upper Missouri. Some boats continued to carry general merchandise between Bismarck and Pierre until 1895, but for all practical purposes the fire canoe disappeared at almost the same time that the Indians ceased fighting. The part it played in their conquest can hardly be overestimated. Without the steamboats, the army would have found the Indians even more difficult to subdue than otherwise. The steamers allowed the army to maintain communications between scattered bodies of troops on opposite sides of an unfordable river. Often they transferred a base of supply from one point to another in a fraction of time that a wagon train would have required. They ferried troops from shore to shore, moved them up and down stream, and repeatedly brought soldiers to places where they were needed in a hurry. They served as dispatch boats, patrol boats, gunboats, and hospital ships as the situation required.49

Taken as a whole, the military service of the steamboat was tangible proof of the aggressive, speculative, and acquisitive spirit that so regularly remained indifferent to humanitarian values when Indians were concerned.


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