

## CHAPTER XIX

### STEAMBOATS THAT DOCKED IN VAN BUREN

In the early days of this section of the country when troops were stationed at Fort Smith, steamboats would ascend the river, whenever the depth of the water would permit, loaded with troops or provisions for those stationed at the fort.

The first boat, as yet known, was the Robert Thompson, commanded by Captain Dohrman, which had made several trips during the early part of 1822. Wood being the fuel used by the boats it was necessary for wood yards to be established at certain distances along the banks of the river to supply the boats with fuel.

To such a one came the Phillips family some time during the latter part of the 1820's. The family consisted presumably of the father, James Phillips, the revolutionary soldier, who died in July of 1861, and the two brothers Thomas and David. No record has been found of any other member of the family. This boat landing took the name of this family.

When the Phillips' family arrived here the land bordering the river was claimed by Thomas Martin, as squatter who tradition says was the first white man to settle here. That honor is also given to a Mr. Boyd. Very soon after their arrival Thomas and David bought the land from Martin and legalized their claim.

When the post office was established here March 30th, 1831, 119 years ago, Thomas was appointed postmaster and served from that time until the latter part of 1836. The postoffice department named the office for Martin Van Buren, then secretary of state under President Jackson. The settlement soon became known by the name of the postoffice.

Very little is known of the Phillips family, not even the state from which they emigrated to Arkansas.

Thomas Phillips was married to Miss Amanda Miller, daughter of Wm. Miller of Van Buren, August 9th, 1834.

He was one of the commissioners appointed to sell the lots in the new town of Whitsontown, which had been selected as the county seat of Crawford county. This sale was to take place July 15th, 1836.

In the early part of the same year he advertised lots for sale at Van Buren.

Feeling that a description of Van Buren at this early date will be interesting, the following is taken from the Arkansas Gazette during the month of April, 1836.

### THE TOWN OF VAN BUREN, ARKANSAS

Is situated in Crawford county on the left bank of the Arkansas river, about 55 miles from the Mississippi river, by the course of the river and a few miles from the Indian boundary line. The immediate situation is picturesque and pleasing to the eye, easily approachable by the roads, usually elevated for a distance on the margin of the river, indeed a portion of the townsite is high and commanding eminence, with an abundant and never failing supply of the most palatable and purest water.

Steamboat navigation to the point and for some distance above is safe and sure as our river affords; its extension to any great distance above is precarious and uncertain and not to be relied upon.

Van Buren has more extensive regions of back country to support it, beyond all shadow of competition, that any other point or place on this river or in the territory known to the reader. To add another weighty item to the list of advantages, the projected United States road now in train of execution from Jackson in Lawrence county, by the county seats of Izard and Washington, crosses the Arkansas river at Van Buren.

The proprietor invites the merchant, the mechanics and capitalists generally and all persons of enterprise and energy of character to make investments in this town.

The undersigned being the sole proprietor of this town, the contract heretofore existing between him and the late General William Montgomery have been rescinded and all disputes as to title from that and all other

quarters fully adjusted, is now ready to dispose of the lots and to be able to give undisputed title.

Gentlemen wishing to invest money or to locate in a thriving new town will do well to examine the superior natural advantages and plat of Van Buren. Her lots are offered at private sale on moderate terms and on accommodating credits, and reductions in price will be made to those making immediate improvements on their premises.

—Thomas Phillips

Van Buren, April 23rd, 1836.

Sometime during the year he sold the entire town-site to Thompson and Drennen, which transaction will be given in the next article. Thomas Phillips died at Van Buren January 2nd, 1837, aged about 50 years. Where he was buried is not known, it may have been in the old cemetery that was located between 4th and 5th streets on each side of what is now Main street at that time a mere path. His widow married again and was the mother of Mrs. B. J. Brown.

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### **Steamboats of the Fifties on the Arkansas**

While searching among some old papers in the old J. Foster store, a book of lading of merchandise shipped by Henry & Cunningham, early merchants of Van Buren, during the years 1850, 1851, 1852 and part of 1853 was found. Believing that a list of boats that docked at the wharf at Van Buren, when it was a busy steamboat town, will be of interest, they are herewith given. You will notice that a number are on their way to Fort Gibson and intermediate points showing that the river was high enough for boats to ascend to the head of navigation—Fort Gibson. Others went down the river to Napoleon and returned. Napoleon was at the mouth of the Arkansas river, and the boats that only went that far, discharged their passengers and freight there and it was taken by the Mississippi river boats either to Cincinnati or New Orleans. This busy Arkansas town is no longer in existence owing to its gradually being washed into the Mississippi river, until now the name of Napoleon has not been

known to the last two generations nor those persons who have become residents of Arkansas during the past forty or fifty years.

When the merchandise was found to be out of the ordinary it had been listed to show what was shipped from here. One point noted was that the cotton was shipped by this firm during these years, but in all probability it was shipped by other firms of this town.

The following is the form of the bill of lading used which was always signed by the clerk of the boat:

Shipped: in good order and well conditioned by.....  
 ..... on board the Steamboat called the .....  
 whereof ..... is Master, now lying at the port  
 of ..... and bound for .....

To say:

(Then a blank space on which the articles are listed).

(Being marked and numbered as in the margin, and are to be delivered in the like good order and condition at the Port of ..... the dangers of the river and fire only excepted) unto ..... or to ..... assigns, he or they paying freight for the said .....

In Witness Whereof, the Master or Clerk of the said boat hath affirmed to bills of lading all of this tenor and date: one of which being accomplished, the others to stand void.

Dated in ..... the ..... day of ..... 185....

"Swallows"—Reynolds, master; Wm. R. Droke, clerk; May 18, 1850 to L. R. On its return from Little Rock it took on merchandise at Van Buren for Fort Gibson.

Flatboat, owned by Daniels; bound for the North Fork of the Canadian; Elisha B. Boyd, Clerk.

"Swallows"—W. R. Droke, clerk, bound for Napoleon with 11 bales of peltries; also twenty-eight bales of deer skins.

Two bundles of bear skins.

Two bundles of raccoon skins.

One bundle of beaver skins.

One bundle of otter skins.

All consigned to Cincinnati, Ohio, May 24th, 1850.

"Johanna,"—John Thurston, master, June, 1850.

"Floatboat"—Daniels, owner; C. B. Boyd, clerk; bound for French Bluff.

"General Shields"—Rogers, master; Fort Smith, June, 1850.

"P. Pennywitt"—Beatty, master; Buckings, clerk; for New Orleans and way stations.

"Dispatch"—Elliott, master; A. D. Rice, clerk; bound for Pleasant Bluff.

"J. B. Gordon"—J. W. Wyatt, bound for Roseville, Ark., with consignment for Judge Aldridges, July, 1850.

"Two Squas," flatboat—Taylor, clerk; to Fort Smith, August, 1850.

Flatboat with C. B. Boyd as clerk bound for Pleasant Bluff.

"Johnanna"—John Thurston, master; P. Thurston, clerk; to Fort Smith, Sept. 1850.

Flatboat, Dempsey Field master, for Fren Bluff; September, 1850.

Flatboat, McDougall, master; for Little Rock, October, 1850.

Flatboat, Geo. Salley, master; bound for Creek Agency landing, November, 1850.

"Umprie No. 2"—Samuel C. Cole, clerk; bound for Fort Coffey; on its return went to Napoleon.

"Exchange"—Williams, clerk; bound for Fort Gibson, December, 1850.

Flatboat, Indian, master; blacksmith, clerk; bound for North Fork, Jan. 1851.

Flatboat, J. W. Wyatt, master; bound for Fort Gibson, Feb. 1851.

Flatboat, Whitlow, master; D. K. Whitton, clerk; bound for Fort Gibson, Feb. 1851.

"Hamburg"—Gordon, bound for Cincinnati.

"Dove"—Bov, master; S. Woodruff, clerk; bound for New Orleans.

"St. Francis"—James, master; C. Collins, clerk; bound for Fort Gibson.

"Pennywitt"—Applegate, master; bound for New Orleans.

"General Shields"—Wm. L. McDougall, clerk; for Fort Gibson, March, 1851.

"Hamburg"—Prichard, master; Gordon, clerk; bound for Cincinnati, March, 1851, loaded with four barrels of pecans; nine bags of peanuts; 28 bags of dried peaches; two bags of dried apples and three boxes of fur skins.

"General Shields"—Rogers, master; Wm. L. McDougall, clerk; bound for Fort Gibson.

"Pontiac No. 2."—Warden, master; bound for New Orleans, April, 1861.

"Exchange"—Hanes, master; J. Ish, clerk; bound for Little Rock, April, 1851.

"General Ben"—Simpson, master; Charles Kennedy, clerk; bound for New Orleans, containing 35 bales of peltries and 35 bales of hides.

"Dove"—Bax, master; Wm. Andrews, clerk; bound for New Orleans, May, 1851. Four bags of beeswax.

"Pontiac No. 2"—Warden, master, bound for New Orleans, May 1851.

Having found other bills of lading from other cities to Van Buren, during the fifties, thought it best to use the names of those that came to the wharf during the forties.

The Governor Meigs came to the landing during March. Powers, master or clerk, 1853.

Thomas P. Ray; John D. Adams, master, was advertised in November, 1853, to make regular trips between Napoleon and Fort Gibson.

Magnolia; John Thurston, commander, was advertised in the early part of 1854 to make regular trips between Napoleon and Fort Smith.

Empire No. 2; J. Kirk, master, was advertised to make trips between Van Buren, Fort Smith and Fort Gibson. It very likely came from Napoleon.

Wm. Armstrong; J. A. Francisco, clerk. From Napoleon to Fort Smith, May, 1850.

Yuba; D. S. James, clerk; from New Orleans to Van Buren, April, 1854.

Alabama; Perry, master, bound for New Orleans to Van Buren, Ark., May 12th, 1854.

Moses Greenwood; Jas. M. Martin, clerk. Bound from New Orleans to Van Buren, March, 1856.

Gypsy; Carter, clerk. Bound from Napoleon to Van Buren, May, 1856.

S. H. Tucker; R. W. Fish, supposedly, clerk. Bound from Cincinnati to Van Buren, June, 1857.

Arkansas; Haynes, master; Green, clerk. Bound from Napoleon to Van Buren, June, 1857.

Umpire; J. Brown, master, bound from Napoleon to Van Buren.

S. H. Tucker; Elliott, master, from Napoleon to Van Buren; merchandise shipped to W. Whitfield, care P. Pennywitt, February, 1857.

Umpire No. 3; Jenks Brown, captain. From Little Rock to Van Buren, Jan. 1857. This must be the same boat as the Umpire.

Cora No. 2; Mosby, master; New Orleans to Van Buren, carrying merchandise for W. Whitfield, Creek Agency in care of Henry, Williams & Co., Van Buren.

Mr. William H. Allen, a brother of Mrs. Jesse Turner, Sr., was clerk on the Steamer Keystone in 1840 and 1841. His diaries kept while a clerk on the river are very interesting. Recently I was privileged, before they were sent to Pittsburg, Pa., to copy from the two bearing on his trip on the Arkansas river. In the copy at the History Commission taken for the purpose of printing a copy, he made remarks about "a piece of woods bordering the river that is filled with the bright plumage of the parakeets as they flit to and fro through the woods."

In the one from May, 1840 to February, 1841, he mentions the following boats Siam, Corvette, Trident, Cinderilla, Lady Morgan. June 6 engaged to carry 59 soldiers to Fort Smith from Little Rock for \$700. Rialto, Hero, John Jay, Steubenville, Little Rock, Cherokee, Corvette, Remac, Odessa and Keystone, Wheeling, Elizabeth. On Dec. 5 we learned the Cherokee had exploded at Lewisburg. Franklin, Keystone and Wheeling have a race. Victorial Exchange, Breakwater, Maid of Arkansas and the Governor Morehead.

From bills of lading we have the following:

Arkansas; Oliver Ingles, master or clerk; bound from Little Rock to Van Buren.

Corvette; Young Stevenson, master; A. W. Sanford, clerk; bound from New Orleans to Van Buren.

Exchange; A. L. Lozen, clerk; bound from Little Rock to Van Buren, November, 1841.

Arkansas; Pennywitt, master; N. B. Thompson, clerk; bound from Napoleon to Vineyard, Ark. Merchandise sent care of Henry & Cunningham, December, 1841.

Effort; Elliott, master; M. W. Lodwick, clerk; bound from Montgomery to Van Buren, March, 1842.

Governor Morehead; D. H. Rudd, master; Leo Tibbatt, clerk; bound from New Orleans to Van Buren. This boat carried eight bundles of printing paper and one keg of printing ink. February, 1842.

John Jay; Mason, master; E. Morton, clerk; bound from Little Rock to Van Buren. June, 1842.

Arkansas; R. Beatty, master; E. Morton, clerk; bound from New Orleans to Van Buren. November, 1842.

Governor Morehead; Tibbets, master, New Orleans to Van Buren, Jan. 6, 1842.

Marletta; H. Birch, master, Cincinnati. Ready for the spring trade between Napoleon and Fort Gibson, February, 1843.

Trident; Houston, master, between New Orleans and Fort Gibson, March, 1842.

The Governor Morehead seems to have a new captain on every trip. She arrived the last of April with J. T. Washington in command.

Expert; Woodward, master; W. R. Hart, clerk. Napoleon to Van Buren.

Express Mail; Thomas Halderman, master. For the Arkansas River trade.

The export in December 1843 was running between Napoleon and Montgomery's Point to Fort Gibson.

Arkansas Mail; R. A. Morrow, master. Cincinnati and Fort Gibson and return, January, 1844.

Evelin; Brown Irvin, master; New Orleans to Fort Gibson, Feb. 1844.



Paragon; arrived at Van Buren, May, 1844.

Marietta; Bradley, master; John F. Cole, clerk. Napoleon to Van Buren; July, 1844.

Rolla; S. G. Hensley, master. Little Rock to Fort Gibson, August, 1844.

Arkansas No. 4; P. Pennywitt, master, is advertised in the Arkansas Intelligencer from November, 1844 to February, 1846, to run between New Orleans and Fort Gibson.

Lucy Walker; Jas. M. Martin, clerk. New Orleans to Van Buren, May, 1844.

Swallow; Captain P. Lodwick, New Orleans to Van Buren, November, 1844.

Wabash Valley; W. M. Larrimore, master. From mouth of White river to Fort Gibson. Advertised for several months.

Arkansas Mail; Pritchard, master; Joseph Kenaue, clerk. Montgomery to Van Buren, January 1845.

James Pitcher; J. B. Palmore, master. Fort Gibson and New Orleans and return. February 15, 1845.

Archer; Woodward, master. Running between Fort Gibson and New Orleans during the summer.

Rolla; Summers, master. Running between Van Buren, Fort Smith and Fort Gibson during the summer.

Little Ben Franklin; J. Simmons, master. Memphis and Fort Gibson, May to September 1845.

Arkansas No. 5; April 1845.

Arkansas Mail; Morrow, master; New Orleans to Van Buren and Fort Smith during the spring of 1846.

During May 1846 the steamboats Republic, Bourbon and Virginia brought goods for the merchants of Van Buren.

Arkansas No. 4, was at the wharf at Van Buren in June 46.

Arkansas No. 5, with Pennywit, master and B. N. M. Durell, clerk; brought goods to Wallace & Ward during May, 1846.

Ginggold; Patterson, master. New Orleans and Van Buren, January 1847.

New Hampshire; W. H. Allen, captain; Geo. Allen, clerk. These were brothers of Mrs. Jessie Turner. April, 1847. This boat blew up in May, 1847 a few miles below Little Rock and George Allen lost his life.

Alert; Thos. J. Gregg, master. This boat ran between Napoleon, Van Buren and Fort Smith, May, 1847.

Wm. Armstrong; Captain Timms, P. H. White; Elliott, master; Medium, E. Timms, master; Santa Fe, Geo. Turner, master; all made trips from Little Rock to Van Buren during the fall of 1847.

Cotton Plant; Morton, master, New Orleans to Van Buren, December, 1847.

Amulet; Capt. Levi Chapman; Little Rock to Van Buren, December, 1848.

Tributary; Wm. R. Clayton, master. New Orleans to Fort Gibson.

Ellen T.; Wm. Craig, master. Napoleon to Little Rock and Fort Gibson, May, 1848.

Alert No. 2; J. P. Gregg, master. November, 1848.

Robert Morris; Brown Irvin, master; New Orleans to Van Buren, December, 1848.

Philip Pennywit; Beaty, master. New Orleans to Van Buren, April, 1849.

Monedo; Thos. Barrett, master. Van Buren to Fort Gibson, April, 1849.

The Dispatch; Edward Parker, master; Van Buren to Fort Gibson. June, 1849.

Great Western U. S. Mail Line will be put in operation November, 1849, between Memphis, Little Rock, Pine Bluff and Van Buren. James Timms in charge.

St. Francis; Capt. L. H. Abrams. Arkansas river trade. November 1, 1849.

Many of these boats were advertised in the Arkansas Intelligencer from 1843 to January, 1850, and made many trips to Van Buren. It was not an unusual sight to see as many as five boats at the landing at one time.

### Steamboat Losses On The River During The Past

The following record of losses of steamboats (117) on the Arkansas River, by snagging, collision, burning and explosions, is as nearly complete as obtainable, and was compiled for us by Capt. Frank C. Kendall, perhaps the oldest living Arkansas boatman. Kendall was himself present at the occurrences of many of these accidents, but fortunately escaped permanent injury and lives now at a ripe old age to write this lengthy chapter of accidents. We trust the old veteran has before him many years of usefulness, free from the hazards of those he has passed. Many other steamers have been sunk and raised. The names of such do not appear here the list includes only the boats whose bones lie at the bottom of the Arkansas river.

Governor Brethitt, Lady Jackson, Exchange, Fort Smith, North Bend, Red Wing, Goldena, Mercury, Miami (explosion), Linton, Irene, Pelican, Pilot, Roseville, Frontier City, Lorrell, Neosha, William Parsons, Igo, Guidon, Cedar Rapids, Last Chance, Bracelet, Centralia, Lady of Arkansas, Dispatch, Itaska, Sallie, Ringgold, Arkansas, Oella, Marietta, Arkansas Traveler, Keynote, Cheney, Chattanooga, ferry boat (name unknown at Rob Roy), Revenue, A. H. Sevier, Pine Bluff, Rolla, D. B. Miller, Lemi Leota, New Hampshire (explosion), Issac Shelby, Dardenelle, Quapaw, Arkansas, Thompson, Rialto, Ella, P. H. White, Progress, Citizen, Rodolph, Hickman (burned), Moneda (explosion), Liverpool, Compromise, J. S. Durham, Tom Bowlin, Kentuckian, Little Rock (side-wheel), Gunboat Ponchartrain (burned), Chester Ashley (burned), Little Rock (sternwheel, burned), Arkansas (sternwheel burned), America, Northwest, Republic, Dan Morton, Arkansas, Hero, Alert, Sally Anderson (burned), Cherokee (explosion), Swallow, J. S. Hall, Jefferson, J. M. Harris, Daisy, T. H. Done, Leon, Belview.

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The Belle of Arkansas.—That old veteran of the Arkansas River, Capt. P. Pennywitt, accompanied by Capt. Chapman, left here for Cincinnati a few days since to

superintend the construction and completion of their new side-wheel steamer now building at that place. She is intended to be a New Orleans and Arkansas river packet and of the following dimensions, viz: 220 feet in length, 35 feet in beam, and 6½ foot hole, two engines with 21 inch cylinders, 8 foot stroke and will carry 3,000 bales of cotton. She is owned entirely by Cpts. Pennywit, Chapman, and Carter of this place and her estimated cost is about \$35,000. From the capacity and experience of Cpts. Pennywit and Chapman in the construction of boats, we anticipate a craft well adapted to the wants of this trade. She is to have all the modern improvements and her cabin is to be fitted up for a first class passenger steamer. She will be ready for the river about the first of October and with "Chap" in command and "Ned Carter" in the office she will, in all respects, be what her name indicates "la Belle de la Riviere."

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Hd. Q. Dist. of the Front  
Dept. of Ark. Fort Smith, Ark.  
March 14, 1864.

In accordance with the within orders from Gen'l Steele Commdg. Dept. of Arkansas, the ferry privilege at Van Buren will be turned over to Wm. F. England, Agent of Charles G. Scott, Administrator of John Drennen as Per. Power of Attorney hereto annexed. Any boat belonging to the said England will be turned over to him. No other ferry will be run there unless one is established by the Government.

Lt. Col. Wheeler Commdg. at Van Buren will see that this order is complied with.

John McHagen  
Brig. Gen. Commdg.

William F. England, mentioned in the above communication, in company with his son, William Totton England, went to an eastern city about the year of 1866 to arrange for the building of a ferry boat to be used at Van Buren on the Arkansas river, and while in this eastern city William F. England disappeared, while his son

made a diligent search for his father no trace was ever found of him after his disappearance.

It is said Mr. England carried a large sum of money on his person at the time he disappeared.

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### **Sinking Of The John Mathews**

As long as there lives one person who remembers the night the steamer John Mathews wrapped itself around the pier of the Frisco bridge and sank in the Arkansas river, the wreck of the ill-fated boat on June 2, 1892, will be a favorite topic of conversation.

The John Mathews was the largest boat ever to ply the river above Little Rock. John P. Hattaway of Van Buren was captain and he and Capt. Blakely were its owners. The steamboat was brand new and since Captain Hattaway had brought it down the Mississippi and up the Arkansas from its dry dock in Cairo, Ill., it had made only two trips.

She had just been from Fort Smith to Webbers Falls, Oklahoma, for a big load of shelled corn and had stopped at various points on the way up to put off freight. She now was bound for Pine Bluff with the heavy cargo of sacked grain and was carrying in addition to the boatload, a large barge piled high with the sacks of shelled corn, and fastened in front of the steamer. It was early summer and there being no school for Captain Hattaway's kiddies to attend, his little daughter, Nettie, and his sons, Leon and Alex, were on board for a vacation cruise, which would terminate about midnight when the John Mathews reached Van Buren, that being their home.

The river was on a big rise and the swift current was carrying in its path tons of driftwood. The John Mathews signaled first at the mouth of Lee Creek according to regulations, for the guards to open the draw bridge and on down the river it whistled again the urgent message.

It took at least three men to open the draw and when only one man went on the bridge to answer the signal, the John Mathews met with disaster.

The current was carrying her fast and when the crew saw the draw closed and realized the danger they tried to dock above but lost control of the boat in the swift water and heavy rubbish going down stream. They turned the boat around and attempted to go back up the river but the current was so swift and the cargo was so heavy that the stern-wheel was shattered against the middle pier. The steamer then was carried broadside against the pier next to the Van Buren bank of the river and the boat was split half in two.

There were about 27 persons on board, Captain Hattaway and his three children, 15 deck hands, day and night engineers, day and night firemen, two pilots, the cooks and the clerk. All were seized with terror, but Captain Hattaway succeeded in getting his little girl, 12 years old, and two sons, ages 8 and 10, and three or four others in a life boat. The boat, however, capsized in midair when the ropes were cut to lower it and spilled its agonized passengers into the belching river. Had it not been a bright moonlight night no doubt they would all have lost their lives.

The captain father grabbed for his daughter and dragged her from the waves and succeeded in lifting Nettie onto the bridge and in pulling himself up, the river being so high that the water lapped near the bridge floor. The night engineer saved Alex and the negro cook saved Leon, who it is said in all the excitement, appeared heart-broken over the loss of a hat.

One of the pilots grabbed two oil cans and holding them under his arms floated down the river about two miles where he was picked up by fishermen.

A deck hand, when he saw the boat crash in two and felt it beginning to turn over, ran from the lower side to the higher side of the steamer and crawled up on the wreckage stuck up out of the water.

The day engineer, the night watchman, and three of the deck hands, all negroes, were drowned. Some of the bodies were found a mile or so down stream on the sand-bar but some of them were never found.

When the sleeping town of Van Buren heard the