



NEWS

6425 SW Sixth Avenue
Topeka KS 6615-1099
785-272-8681

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By Barbara Brackman

Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History March 14 - 20, 1854 (2004)

On March 16th, an important sign of spring appeared in St. Joseph. As the ice broke up on the Missouri River, the first steamship of the season arrived. The *F.X. Aubry* began its regular route from St. Louis to St. Joseph and back, arriving every other Tuesday. The boat, only a year old, was named for Francis Xavier Aubry (also spelled Aubrey), a western legend. Six years earlier Aubry had bet \$1,000 that he could ride from Santa Fe to Independence in six days, a startling proposition in the days when the wagon trains that traveled that 800-mile trade route took two months.

Aubry, a small, brash man, won his bet, averaging 13 miles an hour while wearing out six horses. In that spring of 1854, he had moved on to California, herding sheep as he explored the passes of the Golden State, pioneering wagon and railroad routes. His reputation for speed inspired the boat's builders to christen their new steam packet after him.

America's river system was the super highway of the day. Dozens of boats steamed along the major waterways, the Mississippi, the Ohio and the Missouri, and a western traveler could efficiently and economically travel from Cincinnati or Pittsburgh to the City of Kansas where the Missouri met the Kaw.

River travel's major flaw was its seasonal shutdown. When winter's ice choked the water, businessmen of the river towns impatiently awaited the spring thaw. John Xantus, a Hungarian surveyor, wrote a letter aboard the *S.S. Admiral* on the Missouri north of Fort Leavenworth in March in the late 1850s. "The river is jammed with ice floes and the racket is loud enough to make your hair stand on end, but all this does not bother the American captain and his passengers, for the desire for gain makes them steam over ice jams that would terrify a captain on the Danube. Yet, these steamers do not even have the iron hulls of those that ply the Danube, instead, they are huge wooden castles...they steam at no more than a depth of five feet."

The wooden steamboats were well adapted to their routes. Those that plied the Missouri River were built with extremely shallow hulls to skim over the snags and sawyers, driftwood that would rip the bottom out of a deeper boat. In the spring of

1854, boat builders, traders and merchants looked west along the Kansas River, planning small, shallow boats that would carry trade hundreds of miles into the proposed Kansas Territory. The first to try it was the *Excel*, a stern-wheeler that drew only two feet of water. She hauled food and hardware to the soldiers building Fort Riley and back to Westport in a two-day return trip. Passenger H. D. McMeekin wrote that they “found no more difficulty in navigating the Kansas than we did the Missouri.” (475 words)

David Dary, “The Crazy Bet Of F. X. Aubry,” *Kanhistique*, in KSHS biography scrapbook.

Darryl W. Levings, “Paddle Wheels Once Wrestled Waters of Kaw,” *Kansas City Star*, June 16, 1977.

John Xantus, *Letters from North America*, March 9, 1857, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975) Pg. 147.