A Review of Early Navigation on the Kansas River

Edgar Langsdorf

Before the establishment of Kansas territory in May, 1854, little exact information about the Kansas river was available. Exploration in the 18th and early 19th centuries was concerned chiefly with following the upper Missouri, and the Kansas was hardly known above its mouth. Reports about the river were based, for the most part, on statements by Indians—who usually were reluctant to divulge details of their own country—and on observations of the early fur traders. Despite the handicap of describing and mapping a region which they had not seen, several of the early explorers were able to produce reports of surprising accuracy.

One of the earliest maps of the trans-Mississippi area, drawn by Father Marquette in 1673-1674, although it fails to show the Kansas river, does locate the Kansa and other tribes in approximately their true positions. This map, based upon information secured from Indians with whom Marquette could converse only in sign language, places the Kansa on the 39th parallel, directly south of the Omaha and Pawnee tribes and west of the Osage, thereby indicating that they were then living on the Kansas river. Joliet's map of the same date shows the Kansa in much the same relative position, though farther south, between the 36th and 37th parallels.¹

The first map showing the Kansas river is Guillaume de l'Isle's "Carte de la Louisiane," which was drawn about 1718. On it the "Grande Riv[ière] des Cansez" flows into the Missouri at about the 40th parallel and a large village of "les Cansez" is located at a prominent fork in the river, perhaps the junction of the Smoky Hill and the Saline or the Solomon.² This map, with virtually no changes except for the translation of French into English, was published by John Senex, a London cartographer and engraver, in 1721.³ One of

Edgar Langsdorf is state archivist of the Kansas State Historical Society.


2. Reproduced as the frontispiece in B. F. French, Historical Collections of Louisiana . . . (Philadelphia, 1860), Pt. 2. Delisle (1675-1726) was one of the most important French cartographers of the 18th century.

the earliest written references to the name of the river, other than on maps, is also found at this time. The French explorer Bienville in 1722 spoke of “las rivière des Canzés, qui afflue dans celle du Missouri,” though he made no reference to its navigability.

With the extension of trade among the Western tribes at the beginning of the 19th century, reasonably accurate reports of the river began to appear. In 1797 James Mackay, then an agent of the Spanish “Upper Missouri Company,” compiled a “Table of Distances” along the Missouri river. In this table he noted the “Rivire des Cances,” 100 ¾ leagues from the mouth of the Missouri, and described it as a “Beautiful river upon the south bank [of the Missouri], width of 100 fathoms at the mouth, navigable for canoes for more than 60 leagues at all times; but not for more than 20 leagues for large boats in the autumn when the waters are low; the village of the Kansas is 80 leagues from this river.” Another trader-explorer, François Marie Perrin du Lac, who traveled up the Missouri in 1802, spoke of the river of the “Kanees,” which he said was “navigable at all seasons to the extent of 500 miles,” and spent 12 days trading with the “Kanees” Indians in the vicinity of its mouth.

Although the general course of the river was by this time well established, its tributaries and the capacity of its channel were still little known. A large-scale map of Louisiana, which included all of North America west of the Mississippi and north of the Gulf of Mexico, was published as part of an atlas in 1804, and showed the “Kansas R[iver]” with forks which presumably were intended to represent the Republican, Solomon and Smoky Hill. Several traders and explorers also referred to the river in their journals and reports. Patrick Gass, a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, recorded in his journal for June 26, 1804, that at its confluence with the Missouri the “Canzan or Kanzas, is 230 yards and a quarter wide, and navigable to a great distance.”

H. M. Brackenridge, who traveled on the Missouri river in 1811, wrote that the Kansas “can be ascended with little difficulty, more than twelve hundred

---

4. Lemoine de Bienville to the Council of Regency, Port Louis de la Louisiane, April 25, 1722, in Pierre Margry, Découvertes et Établissements des Français (Paris, 1858), v. 6, p. 387.


7. A. Arrowsmith and S. Lewis, A New and Elegant General Atlas (Philadelphia, 1804), Plate 55. M. Carey’s General Atlas, published in 1814, apparently was the first in which the names of these tributaries appear.

miles.”  

9. Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana; Together With a Journal of a Voyage Up the Missouri River, in 1811* (Pittsburgh, 1814), pp. 220, 221. In the second edition of the *Journal* (Baltimore, 1816), as reprinted in R. G. Thwaites, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (Cleveland, 1904), v. 6, p. 67, Brackenridge modified this statement to read: “The patron of our boat informs me, that he has ascended it upwards of nine hundred miles, with a tolerable navigation.”


in beam, with a draught of about two feet, were designed especially for use in narrow and shallow channels. They were propelled by oars or poles, sometimes assisted by a sail or pulled by a cordelle or tow-rope, and were one of the most important means of transport during the period of the expansion of the frontier. The first keelboat on the Kansas probably was that belonging to Francis and Cyprian Chouteau, which they used in hauling goods and furs between their trading houses and the mouth of the river.  

With the development of the steamboat came the end of the keelboat era and the gradual revolution of river transportation. The first such boat to be used on Western waters was the New Orleans, built at Pittsburgh in 1811, but Henry Shreve's Washington, constructed in 1816, is called the first "real" steamboat to be used on Western rivers. Three years later, in August, 1819, Maj. Stephen H. Long made the first steamer entry into the Kansas river with his little 30-ton boat, the Western Engineer. It had been constructed especially for his expedition to the Rockies, was 75 feet long, 13 feet in beam and drew 19 inches of water. The propelling wheel was in the stern in order to avoid snags, and in order to impress the Indians the steam was blown out of the figurehead, a large black serpent with mouth and tongue painted red. Long's account, describing this first steam voyage on the Kansas, stated that the "mouth of the Konzas river was so filled with mud, deposited by the late flood in the Missouri, as scarcely to admit the passage of our boat, though with some difficulty we ascended that river about a mile, and then returning dropped anchor at its mouth." Another soldier-explorer, John C. Fremont, wrote in 1843 that he went by steamboat to Chouteau's landing, near the mouth of the Kansas river and about 400 miles by water from St. Louis, and thence went 12 miles to Cyprian Chouteau's trading house on the right bank of the Kansas, about ten miles above its mouth and six miles beyond the western boundary of Missouri.  

17. Pike's keelboat, in which he started from St. Louis in 1805, was 70 feet long and carried 21 men with provisions for four months.  
21. Probably Fremont's journey to Cyprian's trading house was made by water, but he does not explain whether the boat used was a steamer.
The establishment of frontier military posts, with their network of connecting roads, made ferry boats necessary for crossing the rivers. On the Kansas, the first known ferry was operated by Moses Grinter about six miles east of present Bonner Springs and about eight and one-half miles west of the Missouri boundary. It was established in 1831 to provide a crossing for the military road between Cantonment Leavenworth and Fort Gibson, Okla.17 Emigration to Oregon and California, much of which passed through Kansas, further stimulated the establishment of ferries.

Probably the most important encouragement to navigation on the Kansas prior to the organization of the territory was the establishment of Fort Riley as a permanent military post in 1853. This event resulted almost immediately in the first official examination of the river to determine its navigability.18 The survey, although it was inconclusive in many respects, showed that boats of shallow draught, if handled skillfully, could be used on the river during the high-water season. The first attempts to use steamboats, in 1854, were successful, and the next year steamers began operating with some regularity from Kansas City to Lawrence, with occasional trips to Topeka and even as far upstream as Fort Riley. This traffic, which continued through the territorial period and the early years of statehood, falling off rapidly, however, after 1860, gave the Kansas legal status as a navigable stream in the eyes of the Federal government.19 The trial steamer, which was also the first to make regular trips, was a 79-ton stern-wheeler, the Excel, which made her first run in April, 1854, carrying 1,100 barrels of flour from Weston to Fort Riley. In 1855 several other boats appeared on the river. All told, 34 steamboats are known to have plied the Kansas from 1854 to 1866, with cargoes of freight and passengers. The Lightfoot, said to be the first boat built in the Territory, was constructed expressly for the Kansas river trade by Thaddeus Hyatt of New York, but it was so unsuccessful that it was shifted to the Missouri river. The last steamer to travel the Kansas was the Alexander Majors, which was chartered in 1866 to run between Kansas City and Lawrence until the railroad bridge at the mouth of the river, which had been destroyed by floods, could be rebuilt.20

River traffic on a commercial scale was doomed by an act of the

state legislature which was approved on February 25, 1864. The railroad age was opening, and in its interest the act declared the river nonnavigable and authorized railroad and bridge companies chartered under state laws to bridge or dam the river without restriction.21 This law remained in effect until 1913, when, after it had been characterized as "a crime against the public welfare of Kansas,"22 it was finally repealed and the river was thereby restored to its legal status as a navigable stream.23 This status has not been changed since, although navigation has been confined largely to sand dredging operations.

Since 1879 the Federal government has taken occasional notice of the Kansas. In that year the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers made the first of a series of surveys, most of which resulted in reports that for purposes of practical navigation the river as a whole was unworthy of improvement by the government and that, further, there was no demand by responsible persons for such improvement.24

21. The Laws of the State of Kansas . . . , 1684, Ch. 97.
23. Kansas Session Laws, 1913, Ch. 259, Sec. 10.