



History of Steamboats on the Red River

Many visitors and residents of the area are amazed to find that steamboats on the Red River provided an important local transportation link 120 years ago. “The river must have been wider or deeper or straighter then,” many people have suggested. Not so. Surveys from the period indicate the Red hasn’t changed much. The images of steam powered paddle wheels chuffing and churning the muddy waters of our border river, difficulties with low water and tight bends, bells, whistles and the arcane jargon of the steamboat men provide one of the most colorful chapters in our local history.

Before steamboats the primary method of transportation on the Red River was the canoe. The demand for a faster way of transportation led to the development of the paddle-wheel steamboat. In 1858 the Saint Paul Chamber of Commerce made a \$1,000 offer to anyone who could have a steamboat ready for business on the Red by the spring of 1859. Anson Northup made a \$2,000 counteroffer which was accepted by the Chamber of Commerce. Northup purchased a Mississippi riverboat named the *North Star* and rebuilt it from 1858-1859. Renamed *Anson Northup* the riverboat was 90 feet by 22 feet, with a capacity of 75 tons. On June 6, 1859 the boat left Breckenridge and headed for Fort Garry (Winnipeg). The *Anson Northup* was not a high quality boat, so after a few years it was completely rebuilt and renamed the *Pioneer*.

Although the *Anson Northup* operated briefly on the river in 1859, significant traffic did not begin until after the rail-

road reached the area in the 1870’s and 80’s. Steamboats offered a faster and more regular service even though they had a higher freight charge - \$4.80 per hundred weight from Saint Paul to Fort Garry.

The Kittson’s Red River Transportation Company was formed in 1872. In the mid-1870’s the *Alpha* and *Cheyenne* steamboat’s were added to the company.

In 1878, J.L. Grandin built a steamboat named the *Grandin* to haul wheat from his farm in Traill County. The *Gandin* was said to be the fastest boat on the Red River.

In 1879, the US government built a dredge at Moorhead, *Unser Fritz*, the government added a boat tender in 1882 called the *General Pope*. At this time a small dipper dredge, the *Otter Tail* was also built.

In the 1880’s three boats were built in Moorhead that were intended for use on the Assiniboine and Red River’s around Winnipeg. These boats were the *Northwest*, *Marquette* (both large boats—over 200 feet), and the *William Robinson*.



The *Grand Forks* was built during the winter of 1894-95. The *Grand Forks* was the last commercial steamer built on the US part of the Red River, it also made the last commercial voyage across the International Boundary in June of 1909.

The advancement of the railroad put an end to the brief but exciting fifty-year run of the steamboat. 1886 was the last year that steamboats regularly ran from the Fargo-Moorhead area. 1910 was the last year they ran from Grand Forks. With the development of the automobile in the 20th century Interstate-29 was built. It runs north to south through the valley. Trucks now carry merchandise from Winnipeg to Fargo-Moorhead in one day. The trip by steamboat took many days.



Selkirk

Steamboat Timeline

<u>Date Built</u>	<u>Steamboat</u>	<u>Area Built</u>
1859	<i>Anson Northup/Pioneer</i>	
1862	<i>International</i>	Georgetown
1870-1871	<i>Selkirk</i>	Mcauleyville
1871-1872	<i>Dakota</i>	Breckenridge
1873-1874	<i>Alpha</i>	Breckenridge
1873-1874	<i>Cheyenne</i>	Grand Forks
1875	<i>Manitoba</i>	Moorhead
1875	<i>Minnesota</i>	Moorhead
1878	<i>J.L. Grandin</i>	Fargo
1878	<i>Pluck</i>	Moorhead
1881-1882	<i>H.W. Alsop</i>	Moorhead
1890	<i>Fram</i>	East Grand Forks
1895	<i>Grand Forks</i>	Grand Forks

For more information:

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