

PORT THREE FORKS, GATEWAY TO THE WEST

Barges and tugboats that traverse the McClellan – Kerr waterway float a few feet over history every day, the sunken remains of keelboats, pirogues, and steamboats. The river traffic enjoys a constant minimum water level of nine feet and boats are lifted over 400 feet through a modern system of eleven locks. French fur traders of the 1800s would be envious because the luxury of a regulated water level would have been most welcome. In their era, the snags created by the ebb and flow of the river were a constant hazard. Traders soon discovered that the birch bark canoe, so popular in northern waterways, was far too frail so boats carved from the trunks of cottonwood trees, the French called pirogues, became the first mode of western river travel.

At the time, rivers were the highways of America, and as explorers and trappers moved westward, waterways proved to be the best means to transport their goods. Some were more accessible than others and the Arkansas and its eastern Oklahoma tributaries, the Verdigris and Grand Rivers, were often less than hospitable. Fairly navigable from January to June, they could be fickle and nothing was more frustrating to trappers than to have two or three tons of valuable furs stuck on a keel boat in shallow water. Later, and because of their draft, the problem was magnified even more for steamboats. It was not uncommon for them to remain in port for days or even weeks, waiting for the water to rise.

Transportation at Three Forks, the confluence of the three rivers, was particularly frustrating, because by the 1830s an estimated 2000 hunters and trappers were bringing skins to trading posts in the area. Earlier, in 1817, A.P. Chouteau who had assumed management of the family's Salina trading post, moved most of their operation sixty miles downstream, Taking a page from living in St Louis where huge flat bottom barges plied the Mississippi, Chouteau constructed flat boats that could carry several tons of cargo downriver to New Orleans.

The attractiveness of Three Forks as a trading center also created problems. Western settlements attracted the usual bootleggers and other criminals and in this case, Indian tribesmen, with a history of conflict who frequently fought among themselves. Consequently, Fort Smith (1817) then Fort Gibson (1824), were established in order that troops could assist in controlling this new and diverse population. These first military outposts were most often supplied by the steamboat, a fairly new form of transportation, called "fire canoes" by fascinated tribesmen. *The Florence*, one of the first, carrying new army recruits, docked at Fort Smith in 1824. Later, when *The Facility* arrived at Fort Gibson in February of 1828, towing two keel boats carrying Creek women and children, a new mode of commercial transportation was introduced. Within three years, Fort Gibson became the westernmost hub for passengers, mail and freight. In the ensuing years, as many as 20 steamboats averaging 300 tons were sailing from Fort Gibson to eastern ports. Their return was heralded by a blast of the horn that could be heard for miles and all work was halted by the time the boat was secured at the dock. Riverboats had a special significance for settlers in the northeastern corner of Indian Territory because both mail and smaller items would be transported north on the Military Road by wagon or stagecoach to eager recipients.

Steamboats also had an impact on military strategy during the Civil War. At the onset, Union Commander, General Winifred Scott proposed his "Anaconda Plan" which would

surround the Confederacy on the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf and the Mississippi River, first with steam powered vessels and later with troops. Since Indian Territory had sided with the South, one vexing problem for Federal commanders was maintaining a supply line to Forts Smith and Gibson. Supplying them by river steamboat became an important alternative because wagon trains on the Military Road were constantly harassed by Confederate troops. But even that means proved vulnerable when on June 15, 1864, General Stand Watie's troops ambushed, grounded, then sank the *J.R. Williams*, north of Fort Smith at Pleasant Bluff. Firing cannons from the bluff and disabling the steamer, Watie's men, always short on everything, treated themselves to food, clothing and other supplies, a feat they would replicate a few months later at Cabin Creek.

The conclusion of the Civil War signaled the beginning of the end of steamboat transportation to Indian Territory. In 1871 the MKT (Katy) railroad was constructed north to south across Indian Territory, accompanied by the Union Pacific east and west. Railroads, not bound by rivers, could penetrate the interior of the nation and within thirty years steamboat travel was history. Today, a reminder of riverboats past is available within reasonable driving distance. Visitors to Kansas City can view a perfectly preserved steamer and its cargo. *The Arabia*, sunk during a storm in 1856 and buried under mud in the old channel of the Missouri River and a symbol of the past importance of waterways, was excavated in 1988.

