

Steamboats on the Upper St. Croix River

Objectives:

1. To demonstrate the different roles of steamboats in the Upper St. Croix River Valley.
2. To show students the importance of steamboats in the settlement and growth of the valley.

Lesson Overview:

The Upper St. Croix River Valley as defined during the steamboat days started from just above Stillwater and ended up river at the head of navigation at Taylors Falls, Minnesota and St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin. People in this part of the valley depended on steamboats as the transportation link with the outside world. This started when Indian treaties in 1838 opened the valley to lumbering interests until all the communities along the river had railroad service in 1887. The first boats brought equipment to set up sawmills and also supplied manufactured goods and food for the mill settlements along the river. Later immigrants from foreign countries arrived in ever increasing numbers and started farms. Steamboats were needed to bring farm products to market. Reliance on the boats had its shortfalls; the river was frozen in the winter; during the spring and early summer log drives took over the river; by late summer the river level dropped and the boats had difficulty navigating the shallow St. Croix River.

Class Time:

1. In 1838 the small steamboat, Palmyra, chugged up the St. Croix River loaded with equipment to construct a sawmill at the falls where Taylors Falls and St. Croix Falls are located today. The sternwheeler Palmyra was the first boat to enter the St. Croix River Valley. The boat tied up there in the rocky gorge called the Dalles. Local Ojibwa Indians came aboard and through a fur trader acting as interpreter were informed that the treaty was signed that opened the entire St. Croix River Valley for laying claims to mill sites and pine land. Soon another such mill was constructed at Osceola, Wisconsin about 8 miles south in 1844 to take advantage of the water power of the Cascade Falls near the river. Small towns grew up around the mills some of which no longer exist except for a few houses such as Franconia about 3 miles south of the Dalles. Steamboats traveled the river at irregular intervals to supply these mill towns with equipment, food and workers.
2. By the early 1850's people came to the Valley to farm. A few were immigrants from foreign countries, but most were from the eastern United States following America's westward movement. They hitched rides on steamboats serving the mill towns like Taylors Falls, St. Croix Falls, Franconia and Osceola. These farmers depended on the steamboats to deliver the necessities for farming and to bring their crops to market. After the Civil War more immigrants came to the valley to farm. Enterprising steamboats owners saw the possibilities of serving the growing number of people along the river by making regular trips. In fact one of the first boats to do this was called the Enterprise. Its captain, Oscar Knapp, commanded steamboats on the St. Croix River for almost 50 years.

3. By the 1860's and especially after the Civil War it was a time of business as usual for the steamboats that make regular stops on the St. Croix River. To give the best possible service to the river towns a steamboat went downstream one day and returned the next. Captain Knapp's second boat the G.B. Knapp make a route from Taylors Falls and St. Croix Falls to Prescott, Wisconsin about 50 miles downstream where the St. Croix River flows into the Mississippi River. The G.B. Knapp would pick up freight and passengers left there by the "big" Mississippi steamboats heading for St. Paul. G.B. Knapp worked this route Monday through Saturday, making three round trips a week. Often running opposite the G.B. Knapp was the Nellie Kent commanded by William Kent. This gave the river towns boat service twice daily. Incidentally, both of these boats were built in Osceola. On Sundays the boat often hired out for excursions like Sunday School picnics.

The river towns depended on the boats for dry goods, groceries, machinery, fine furniture, pianos and barrels of codfish, and apples. They brought travelers on routine business and immigrants looking to start new homes. Wheat and other grain products were the most important items shipped out of the St. Croix Valley by boat. Often the boats towed barges loaded with wheat.

4. It sounds like an ideal set up with steamboats providing service to river communities twice a day. However, there were problems. The river froze solid from mid-November to mid-April. During that time towns along the river were virtually isolated from the outside world. Even the navigation season had its interruptions. In the spring and early summer log drives filled the river; a small wooden steamboat did not stand much of a chance against millions of feet of white pine logs. Often in the late summer the water level dropped and steamboats had difficulty getting over the river's many sand bars. Captain Knapp said, "The boats had to be able to travel on heavy dew." Railroads with their regular and year-round service spelled "the end" of excursion boats on the St. Croix River whether powered by steam at the turn of the century or by diesel engines as they are today.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways were steamboats important to the growth of the Upper St. Croix River Valley?
2. How do you think log drives, low water and long winters affected the people who lived along the river?
3. How do you think the steamboats schedule affected the people along the river and their daily lives?

Student's Review Questions

Name _____

Date _____

1. What is the name of the boat you are riding on? _____

2. Name three rock formations that you have seen on the Scenic Boat Tour.

3. What is the Captain's name? _____

4. What river are you travelling on? _____

5. What two states are you going between? _____

6. What propels the boat you are on? _____

7. Where on the river was the largest log jam? _____

8. What rock formation was the river named after? _____

9. Why is the river brown in color? _____

10. When and where was the treaty signed that opened up the river to logging?

11. What were two of the Indian Tribes in the area? _____

12. What is "Mark Twain?" (not the writer) _____

13. When was the last steamboat to come up the St. Croix to Taylors Falls/St.Croix Falls area?

14. What replaced the Steamboats? _____