

2009

Review of *Navigating the Missouri: Steamboating on Nature's Highway, 1819-1935* By William E. Lass

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Navigating the Missouri: Steamboating on Nature's Highway, 1819-1935. By William E. Lass. Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008. 464 pp. Maps, figures, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00.

For more than forty years, William E. Lass's pathbreaking *A History of Steamboating on the Upper Missouri* served as the authoritative history of the Upper Missouri. Now, Lass has culminated his career by extending his important study to the entire Missouri River and its navigable tributaries, the premier river corridor in the trans-Mississippi West.

From St. Louis to Fort Benton, the Missouri River served as a natural highway into the vast North American West. Lass places the progress of steamboating on the Missouri River in the context of the western movement, fueled by the surge in American nationalism and the development of technology. He weaves the complex story through the history of western settlement, changing Indian policies and relocation, activities of fur traders, and the application of military presence.

From the growth of St. Louis in the 1820s as the crossroads of north-south travel on the Mississippi River and east-west travel on the Ohio and Missouri rivers, *Navigating the Missouri* presents dramatic developments as Missouri's population boomed and river communities grew along the lower Missouri. Lass breaks new ground in his analysis of the economics and risks of steamboating and how the allied effects of steamboating permeated all aspects of the economy of new river communities. The growth in river trade extended up the Missouri with the explosive burst of national expansion, resulting in heavy overland migration, Army troop movements, and a lively trade in agriculture.

As the agricultural frontier extended westward and the economic focus shifted to the upper Missouri, steamboating extended to Fort Benton, the head of navigation on the Missouri, to support the fur trade, delivery of Indian annuities, and military contracts. Lass relates the development of the new river communities—Sioux City, Yankton, Bismarck—and the advances in steamboat

technology in developing “mountain boats” with the economics of steamboat companies.

Navigating the Missouri balances well the development of steamboating on the lower and upper Missouri, as well as important tributaries, the Osage to the Yellowstone. Lass supports his broad research and careful analysis with excellent use of tables and maps. He shows how steamboats symbolized progress and modernity and affected all aspects of river community society and culture. Perhaps of greatest importance, Lass places Missouri River steamboating in the context of national and regional transportation development. *Navigating the Missouri* is an immensely important addition to Missouri River history, and it will serve scholars and general readers well for decades to come.

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