Review of *Steamboats West: The 1859 American Fur Company Missouri River Expedition* by Lawrence H. Larsen and Barbara J. Cottrell

Ken Robison

Using two exceptional traveler journals, Steamboats West takes the reader on a remarkable journey "on one of the most memorable feats of steamboat navigation in North American history." The adventurous travelers, Elias J. Marsh, medical officer, and Charles Henry Weber, tourist, boarded the steamboat Spread Eagle for the annual American Fur Company expedition up the Missouri River to Fort Union in Dakota Territory.

In the words of historian Hiram Chittenden, "The incidents of a single steamboat voyage from St. Louis to Fort Union would make an entertaining chapter in any book of adventure." But, for Marsh and Weber, their adventure was just beginning. At Fort Union, they cross-decked to the accompanying steamer Chippewa, as Charles P. Chouteau, manager of the American Fur Company, executed his plan to extend steamboating to Fort Benton, the head of navigation on the Missouri River some 900 miles above Fort Union.

From midday on May 28, 1859, when the steamboat Spread Eagle backed away from the crowded St. Louis riverfront, Marsh and Weber recorded their impressions and observations as the two steamers progressed slowly up the Missouri. Their accounts are supplemented by the official reports of Charles P. Chouteau and Captain William F. Raynolds, a topographical engineer who led an 1859 expedition into the Yellowstone and Missouri river basins.

Skillfully integrated with these accounts are earlier tourist observations from the late 1700s to the mid-1850s; discussion of the settlements developed along each segment of the river; advances in steamboat technology making this voyage possible; and historic interaction with Native Americans. What emerges is the historical evolution of steamboating from the lower to the upper Missouri presented in
a highly readable style, illustrated with well-selected paintings and photographs, and spiced with the fascinating observations of Marsh and Weber. If the book has a weakness, it lies with surprising author inaccuracies: Factor Alexander Culbertson was not “an army veteran” (p. 48); adventurer Maximilian was not “on his second Missouri River trip” in 1833 (p. 157); and early fur trader Kenneth McKenzie did not accompany this expedition (p. 176).

In 1859, the American Fur Company set out on what would then be the longest steamboat trip in North American history—a 6,200-mile endurance test up the Missouri River from St. Louis to just fourteen miles short of Fort Benton, and back again. This book takes the reader along on that important trip—observing and hunting wildlife, battling the elements from storms to hordes of mosquitoes, and fighting the river’s obstructions from snags to rocky rapids. For the reader, this is a journey well worth taking.

KEN ROBISON
Overholser Historical Research Center
Fort Benton, Montana