

The Splendid Warefaring in the 21st Century

By Gerry "Lucky" Messmer

-Ashley's Return: The Keelboat Muskrat- Part 4

Have you ever had someone say something to you that was so outlandish that you nearly dismissed it or spit out your drink? When Jack and I were discussing the journey that is exactly what happened to us when our friend Bill Bailey said, "I'll build a keelboat". Bill has built many historically correct forts, restored log cabins and barns his whole life, but had never built a keelboat, although, as he noted, it was on his bucket list.



Keelboat in progress.

Once he made the commitment, Bill dove right in researching, talking to builders that made boats of the era, and reading books about keelboats on the Missouri in his free time. Bills business, as a master craftsman, takes him all over the region to worksites, so he would need to be able to bring the boat with him. He acquired a boat trailer, modified it for the weight and began building it in the evenings after work, often using trouble lights to see. His efforts were no less than heroic juggling jobs with customers, building a keelboat on the road and maintaining his family life. It is a small glimpse of his impeccable character and unequivocal work ethic.

By the time Bill met us in Yankton, SD to launch the keelboat, now named the Keelboat Muskrat, he had about a full

year of work into it. At first, he was reluctant to Captain the boat, but after talking to him he agreed to make the journey with us, and thus became known as Captain Bill.

Having seen very few pictures of the Muskrat being built before we left, we had no idea what she would look like. When he pulled up, it was like a dream! Before us sat a keelboat built exactly the way they were in 1825 and even painted with historically correct paint colors. He used all proper materials and most importantly, techniques. Our Muskrat, which was one of the boats in General Atkinsons flotilla, came in at about one third to one half scale at 35 feet and a dry weight of about 5500 pounds. Now the time had come to put her in the water for the first time ever. This would be interesting, because the original Muskrat sank twice on the Missouri while Ashley was with the Atkinson flotilla going from the confluence of the Missouri River to St. Louis. Both times she was repaired and put back into service.



Keelboat almost finished.

As Bill backed the trailer slowly into the water, we had to figure out how to get it off the trailer due to its weight. The big question was, could he get the trailer far enough into the water to float it, or would we need to figure out another method to lift the Muskrat off the trailer? Fortunately, he was able to get far enough in as he had extended the tongue for clearance of the bow when towing it behind his truck. As we floated the Muskrat, we kept the trailer in the water



In the fog.



Captin Bill.

as we assessed her. Unfortunately, the Muskrat began taking in water right away, which was not unusual considering the period build method and the fact that she would need to swell to close the gaps in all the planking. The water was coming in too fast, and something needed to be done.

The original boats had a lifespan of about 5 years. Many of them sank or burned, but once they went in the water they never left, otherwise the planking would shrink and never swell again to close the gaps. And so it would be with the Muskrat, this would be her only journey and after she came out of the water Bill intended to donate her to someone for a museum to live on in an educational role. That day would come, and I'll cover that next month.

We had to determine where the water was coming in. Bill spent a few minutes assessing the situation and pinpointed the leaks, so we set out to fix them. This would be the first of many uses of the tar and oakum he brought with him. By the end of the 900 miles, we would all spend hours in the bow or stern filling holes at the end of a day. The muskrat was true to the period, she leaked from the top, the bottom, and the sides!

Once we had the leaks patched, we put her back in the Missouri River and commenced the loading and preparation for the next day's launch. We estimated about 3000 pounds of gear was loaded on at the beginning, and even at that, she only drafted about 13 inches of water. The crew and boat were now ready, and Captain Bill, apprehensive

and nervous, was set to float her down the Mighty Mo.

A small group of folks, no more than 10 or 12 stood on the dock at Riverside Park in Yankton to bid us farewell. As we pushed off, we all had no idea what the coming days would bring. We knew the Missouri River was flooding, but we had no idea it was 22 feet above flood stage. The flood of 2019 would set records in 42 locations, claim three lives, and nearly claim the Keelboat Muskrat and her crew. Also, important to understand is the difference in the Missouri River Ashley traveled on and the river of today.

They used to say the Missouri was a mile wide and three feet deep. It was a very different river with ever changing braiding and depths. Keelboats of the day could use sails a bit, pull them by rope and have hunters following along on the banks hunting.

Our Missouri River experience would be much different. First, upriver there were 5 dams and lakes we could not travel on. Keelboats are made for rivers and are not stable enough for windy

lakes with high waves. Next, the Missouri River had been changed into a barge canal by the Corp of Engineers as was now only about 300 yards wide and 40 to 60 feet deep, without flooding. We could not pull it by rope, could not drink the water and we could not hunt for food, so we had to carry all our provisions. Finally, the current is three times that of 1825 at a constant 7-8 mph when at normal levels.



A peaceful stop.

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We launched into a strong headwind and had to pole and row hard to get out and away from the bank of the river. We encountered many deadfalls and stumps and the water was about 5-6 feet deep. The first few days we would experience the Missouri River just as Ashley and his men had in this initial segment. It was still the braided, shallow, and a wide river in its glory, untouched by human hands to turn it into the canalized barge canal it would become a few days ahead of us.

We made 28 miles before pulling over to camp on the Nebraska side for our first night. After a flawless landing by Captain Bill, we made camp, cooked a meal, and had our first encounter with the mosquitoes of the Missouri River. Everything you read about them in history books is still true. They are mean, relentless and exist in numbers

Muskrat from running aground. Looking back over the stern the sun, shining through the fog, formed a halo over the back of the boat, a welcome sign of hope. Looking off the port and starboard sides we could not see the banks of the river and had no idea how far away they might be. It was a moment that took us all right back to 1825 and the hazards Ashley and his men faced. It made us realize how you don't have control over Mother Nature and in a split second you could perish, being pulled down into the brown, murky water of the river to a grisly death.

We crept along riding the gentle current, pushing away floating debris, and making our way through the mysterious and dangerous fog. After several hours we slowly emerged from the fog hanging over us, delighted in that we had kept the Muskrat in deep water and were no longer



In perspective.

we were sure outnumbered the stars. We would have very little respite from them and on many mornings, we woke to pocked faces from mosquito bites while trying to sleep. We all slept on shore the first night except Captain Bill, who would always sleep on his boat.

After a breakfast of coffee and oats we had a smooth launch and headed to Vermillion. After about an hour we headed into a left bend in the river, and as we did so a heavy fog started to set in. At this point the river was very dangerous with many deadfalls and floating debris and is the only stretch that resembled what Ashley encountered in 1825. We would only use the oars to keep our bearing and allow the current to move us. Almost instantly, as we entered the fog our visibility dropped to 30 feet or less. We lost sight of the banks, and all were on high alert with our poles to push away debris or to push the Muskrat away from a stump or trapped deadfall.

You could have heard a pin drop as we all stared into the fog trying to find our way and to ensure we kept the

in danger of running aground. The sun never looked so good. We made about 32 miles before stopping for the evening to enjoy black beans, rice, corn, and ham in a stew. Just before dark the "flying needles" began their assault on us as we tried to get some much-needed rest.

When studying the journals of General Atkinson and William Ashley, during the keelboat journey, it is interesting to note that they would launch each morning, travel for several hours, and then stop for breakfast, launching again to travel until midday, stopping for a noon meal, launch again and travel until just about dark before stopping for the night for dinner and rest.

On our fourth day we made it to Omaha, NE riding the crest of the flood. As we made our approach to land at a downtown marina, the only safe place we could find, there was a 911 Memorial on the shore but now underwater. I was standing on the bow with a rope in hand; ready to jump onto the dock as we drifted toward the Memorial. In the final moments before making the landing it seemed as

if we were going to hit the Memorial. All I could envision was the 8500 pounds plowing into it, smashing the boat, and toppling the beautiful Memorial while the current ruthlessly pounded away at the wreckage. As we came within 10 feet, all I could think about was, how in the hell are we going to pay for it? This was an independent journey, not sponsored, no insurance and I was running through my mind what I could sell to pitch in my portion for restoration. Not even in my mind was our safety or damage to the boat, just paying for that memorial! In the last second, Captain Bill, using the current and momentum of the Muskrat made his final turn into the marina landing us smooth and safe with the skill of a seasoned sailor.

dragoons from St. Charles and the regular garrison under the command of Captain Eli Clemson, built the Fort in 1808 to serve several purposes. It functioned as an outpost in the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase, housing soldiers to guard the new territory and to protect the United States Factory Trade House there.



With friends at Ft. Osage.

Fort Osage also aided the American government in be-friending the area's Osage Indians. Finally, the Fort offered Missouri's first settlers a sanctuary from which to venture westward. Under the direction of George Sibley, trade flourished at the Fort, and relations with the Indians grew stronger. The Factory, a three-and-one-half story high trade house, reflecting the French Colonial architectural style, was one of the few operated by the U.S. government without financial loss. In keeping with the old legal term, Sibley served as the Fort's "Factor", keeping track of the dollar value of each exchange.

By 1822 however, private traders who resented the Fort's competition lobbied Congress to end the Factory System. Because the lobbying proved successful and because settlers pushed the frontier further west, both traders and soldiers abandoned the Fort by 1827. Since Ashley went through in 1825 on Atkinson's flotilla, it is entirely possible that they stopped here for at least an overnight. Walking up from the river it made your hair stand up thinking Ashley and his men may have walked up the same or nearby hill to the fort for a break and some evening spirits. It would be a grand stop where we met many familiar faces who greeted warmly and where we certainly enjoyed some lively spirits and jollification in the evening. We did spend a bit of time working on the Muskrat and I spent more than two hours in the bow repairing a hole with hammer, cut nails, tar and oakum.

Fort Osage is a gem along the Missouri River and for those who enjoy history, it is a "must see" location well preserved and with many educational events. Next month we will continue the Journey of the Keelboat Muskrat, some near miss experiences, stops along the way and our final landing. ^{MB}



The author.

The next morning, we were informed that during the night we had received 4-6 inches of rain, the river was expected to crest in two days, and that three levies had broken up-river from us. To make things worse, the Mighty Mo was under a flood watch. We were all soaking wet, our gear wet and with no respite from the rain in sight we launched and continued our sojourn.

After a 52-mile day we landed at South Table Creek for the night. This was a great opportunity to layout all our gear to dry and sleep on shore. From the information given to us we expected the river to rise about 12 inches, but we were surprised with only 1-2 inches. We found out that the levy's that broke spilled over the sides of the banks of the river dissipating the water. During the night the Muskrat continued to take on water and I was up at 2 AM bailing her out and then again at 5:30 AM, not much sleep, but at least the mosquitos weren't bad.

We departed South Table Creek and headed out to make Indian Cave. Although we had the ability to bathe on the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers, here we had not. Most of us haven't bathed in the river in at least ten days. Needless to say, the Muskrat was getting a bit musty.

Several days later we would land at Fort Osage in Sibley, MO. Under the direction of William Clark, joint commander of the Lewis and Clark expedition, 80 volunteer