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Across the Mississippi

Crossing the Mississippi River was a serious problem for the pioneers who came to Iowa before bridges spanned the stream. Railroads and highways alike ended abruptly on the east bank. Some of those first settlers, like one of our early Governors, probably recalled the then-familiar hymn:

Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood
Stand dressed in living green;
So to the Jews old Canaan stood
While Jordan rolled between.

But the Mississippi was so much wider than the Jordan!

Thousands of immigrants who came before the seventies entered the promised land of Iowa by means of ferries. The steamboat companies and ferrymen were bitterly opposed to the construction of bridges across the Father of Waters. The company that built the Rock Island Railroad bridge at Davenport was involved in litigation for several years. And those test cases were all the more notable on account of the participation of Abraham Lincoln as counsel and dramatic because of the wreck of the *Effie Afton*. But scarcely less de-

terminated was the opposition to bridging the river between Dunleith (East Dubuque) and Dubuque. The railroad bridge was opened for traffic in December, 1868.

W. K. Ackerman, an early president of the Illinois Central Railroad, referring to the land grant in aid of the construction of the road, remarked that the provision extending the line to Dubuque was singular in as much as "it assumed that a bridge was to be constructed across the Mississippi from Dunleith to Dubuque . . . but made no requirement as to its construction."

In point of fact, the bridge was not built until thirteen years after the railroad reached the Mississippi. In 1868, after persistent opposition, it was built upon the authority of a separate charter by the Dubuque and Dunleith Bridge Company. In the meantime the Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad had been constructed westward. In 1867 it extended as far as Iowa Falls and this track was leased by the Illinois Central for twenty years. In the absence of a bridge to connect the two lines, a ferry served for transportation in open weather, the ice for the rest of the year.

Nearly two years before the bridge was open, my mother on her way to Iowa encountered the inconvenience and danger of crossing the river just as the ice was going out. Many of the immigrants

who came to Dubuque by rail between 1855 and the late sixties must have had similar experiences.

Father, Reverend L. N. Call, was one of the ministers whom the home missionary societies of various denominations were sending out to care for the spiritual welfare of the settlers pouring into this region after the Civil War. He had been directed to Franklin County where there were no church buildings, no railroads, and only sketchy wagon roads. There he arrived in February, 1867, and mother followed with her four children, the oldest not quite eleven, early in March.

Having bought her tickets from Chicago to Ackley, the nearest point to Hampton which was her destination, she had no thought of any difficulty until, as the train rolled on toward Iowa, she heard the conductor express misgivings as to whether the ice would hold if the mist turned to rain. His fears were justified. When the passengers alighted at Dunleith, they were told by local officials that the ice was cracking, growing unsafe, and no more teams could cross. In fact the ice had already broken away from the Iowa side and flatboats were carrying the latest travellers across the thirty or forty feet of water.

Poor mother! With four tired children and not too much money! She saw some men carrying their bags, walking toward the river. At once she

asked where they were going and was told that they intended to walk across, but that it was a very risky thing to do. Mother hesitated just a moment. She knew that father would be waiting for her at Ackley; but should she take the risk? Then she inquired, "How long do you suppose it will be before the ferry could run?"

"No one knows. If it freezes up there will be ice; if it rains to-night there will be water."

Mother decided to cross with the others. "If some one can be found to carry the big bag," she declared, "the children will help me and I will carry the little one."

At first the agent would not hear of it, wouldn't have anything to do with it. But mother was so brave and determined that finally a man went along to help and the little procession started across the ice, though against the protests of the officials. Mother carried Myra, my brother David was loaded with bags, my sister Leona with the big lunch basket, and I was told to "try to keep up".

I can see yet, as in a dream, that great expanse of gray ice. Even then it was cracking, and as we went on there was a low grinding sound, which was even more alarming, mother said afterward, though I noticed none of this. I do remember being worried because the guide kept calling,

"String out! String out!" and I didn't know how to string out!

Others were crossing at the same time and we were constantly warned not to crowd together or we would break through. Mother who, with all her burdens, was clipping along with the rest would call out cheering and encouraging me to come along. I don't think she had realized how wide the river was, how far the distant shore.

The sounds of the cracking ice grew more ominous; all quickened their pace, walking as lightly as possible. Then one of the men whose kindness we never forgot, noticing that I was obviously unequal to the occasion, said that if one of the others would take his small bag, he would carry the little girl. Oh what a relief to mother! And what an ordeal for me, for my benefactor was wearing one of the great travelling shawls not uncommon in those days (I remember reading that Lincoln sometimes wore one), and the large pin that held it jabbed me cruelly as we hurried along.

After what seemed like a very long time we reached the end of the ice and, walking tremblingly along the boards laid down to protect the crumbling edges, one after another we stepped into the boat. There's the dim memory of the confusion, the loud commands, the swift black water crumbling the ice away; then a sudden shouting

and they said a man, a few rods back, had broken through and was clinging desperately while others were hurrying with long boards to shove along the ice toward him.

Much of this I heard afterward till I seem to remember some of these things myself. But at the time I was cold and greatly disturbed because the dirty water in the bottom of the boat was spoiling my new shoes.

As one by one we reached the muddy bank, just for one moment mother gathered us to her with feelings that can be imagined, then hurried us away to the train that was waiting to carry us to our new home.

That night the ice went out.

Once in after years, when we recalled that day, as we did many times, my brother (then the professor of Greek at the University of Iowa) told what dismay filled his boyish heart as he saw mother's determinedly-cheerful face growing pale as we hurried across that treacherous ice, and he asked her what she was thinking during that anxious hour. Mother waited a minute, then said, "I was thinking of your father and all he had been writing about you children growing up in Iowa."

Dear mother! She couldn't know how the lives of her family were to be bound up for years to come with the development of this new State and

its institutions; what pride they would feel in its beauty and fertility and literacy; how deeply interested they would be in helping to maintain civic, educational, and moral standards that would make Iowa, indeed, that "better country" of which pioneers like father and mother dreamed.

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