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"RIVER PEOPLE"*

WILLIAM SEALE

The riverman, as an early Texas character, is virtually dead. He is not one of the popular frontier "types" around which we Texans like to base our vision of the past. The cattleman—the cotton planter—the lawyer—the sheriff—the Indian fighter—and the outlaw are all familiar stereotypes, and in our minds we have no trouble placing them in the streets of 1850 Galveston or 1840 Nacogdoches or at Washington-on-the-Brazos that spring of 1836. General Sam Houston pleases us mightily, because he was a lawyer, a sometimes cattleman, an Indian fighter; he had a mysterious past, and he was the hero of San Jacinto; Sam Houston epitomizes our concept of the early Texan, and we follow his career like fascinated movie fans, gobbling new manuscript material about him, reading undocumented books which dangle sensationally intimate fiction from bare threads of truth. River people lived in that world of Sam Houston and Three Legged Willie and Stephen F. Austin. Their lives were not particularly glamorous. Their purpose on the Texas scene is difficult for us to imagine.

There was a time when a man did not think it strange to address a letter, "*Texas, In The Western Woods.*"¹ Indeed, the Texas people knew about, with relation to settlement, was just that: a great, silent woods. Land was not hard to get, in the midst of those woods. Accessible land, however, was quite another matter. The previous frontier experience had taught settlers that to realize dreams of riches, land was simply not enough. Texas cotton and corn and tobacco had to be sold; they had to be taken to market, and the best market was usually on the Gulf Coast. Roads were a great problem. New roads were stump-scattered and eroding—old roads were deep-rutted and muddy. Creeks and rivers were not bridged, and when a ferry was not available, one had either to build a raft or wait until the water level was low enough to facilitate crossing. Such a journey from San Augustine to Sabine Pass could take as much or more than six weeks. And too, land travelers risked the danger of damage to their wagon-cargo, and of course trouble with Indians and outlaws, which, oddly, seemed to be the least of their worries.

River travel as the solution to the transportation need was not earth-shaking. Early Texans had traveled rivers before—the Tennessee, the Mississippi, the Fear, the Rappahannock. The problem was—"Who will be the rivermen?" Most people came to Texas to plant the land, to fulfill within themselves the agricultural ideal which dazzled nineteenth-century Americans. For everyone there existed the chance to reach this ideal, especially in the great uncleared, unplowed forests of Texas. Few settlers were willing to surrender their chances with the land for a life on the rivers.

*A paper read by Professor Seale before the annual meeting of the East Texas Historical Association in October, 1966.

Consequently, as late as 1840, farmers laced their letters with mournful complaints about transportation, which, when it existed, was not in sufficient supply to fill the demand.²

Texas was not blessed with outstanding rivers. The Sabine, the Neches, the Trinity, the Colorado, and the Brazos were the pertinent streams where river travel was concerned. These rivers existed in an unimproved state through the Mexican years, the Republic, and in fact, until well after the Civil War. Narrow and twisting, the rivers were sometimes so shallow in their natural state that rivermen had to await the spring rise before they could hope to reach their destination. Sunken logs, fallen as trees from the riverbank, slanted upward from the bottom of the river, and lurked just beneath the surface as "snags," water-seasoned to rock hardness, so firmly secured in their positions that they could rip a boat in half as it pressed upon them in the current. Rock shoals and sandbars were hidden in the dark waters, threatening damage and chaos to vessels; the Blue Buck Shoal on the Sabine was the most notorious, though the Indian Creek Shoal on the Angelina presented as many problems. Riverbank trees sometimes hung so far out over the water as to be a hazard, as were steep bluffs which dropped crashing into the water now and then, and sometimes upon the river vessel. For many reasons, then, rivermen preferred to travel at high water times. There was less chance of disaster, and the current moved faster.

Generally speaking, our Texas river people were rivermen on a part-time basis. Very often they were farmers who wished to supplement their incomes with the cash a river trip might bring. Farmers had usually borrowed heavily on their crops even before they were harvested, and could expect to take home no cash, or at least very little. Part of the farmers' cash went to the riverman who shipped his crop downriver. This cash the riverman might invest in a farm of his own—slaves, tools, or, as seems to have been the case several times, partial payment for machinery for a cotton gin—wherein he could get even more of the farmers' cash in the coming year. Taking a hypothetical situation, we might consider a poor boy who had served in the Revolutionary Army and had gotten a grant of land. He, and maybe his wife and a little child comprised his household. Working his fingers to the bone, he and his wife might clear a fifteen or twenty acre field and plant cotton and corn. For seed and equipment he necessarily went into debt at the local store, and when he made his crop, his profit was applied to the debt. The next planting time he might plant more land, cleared in the cold months; but he would still have to borrow. He envisioned having slaves, but to buy a slave he needed cash, or at least a partial payment. To get that cash, since he has, remember, absolutely nothing but his land and bare essentials with which to farm, he can, very inexpensively, become a riverman. From trees on his land (trees which he has to get rid of anyway) he fashions a raft or maybe even a flatboat, if he has the energy to split the logs. At never less than one dollar a bale and sometimes three dollars, he will agree to ship his neighbors' cotton to the coast, or to some downriver center. In doing so, he eliminates the cost of shipping his own bales, and reaps a percent of each bale his clients have made. Hiring a local youth or two, he puts his plain vessel into the river

current, and by means of long poles and a watchful eye, guides it to his destination. At the market he places the cotton with the various business houses with which the upcountry farmers have dealt through traveling agents or by mail. What money is involved he secures in a money-belt (if the farmer has not arranged to have it deposited at a coastal bank), and walks home, or perhaps buys a horse and rides, or catches a keelboat, traveling free, in exchange for his services as a deck hand. Back home he finds himself with cash payment from the farmers, cash payment for the vessel he sold to a lumber dealer, and cash from his crop, which he applies to his debt. The extra money, then, he may use to expand his farm—maybe the down-payment on a slave, maybe another money-making device. The hard labor of river life he takes for granted in his quest for success, doubtless when he has acquired slaves and is therefore able to have a large, highly profitable farm, he will retire from the river and settle to being a *planter*—thus fulfilling the ideal that has brought him to this wilderness woods.

The story is rather typical. Full time rivermen had difficulty in building a reputation strong enough to warrant farmers to entrust valuable cotton to them. The most esteemed asset of a riverman was his honesty and dependability. As a local farmer himself, he was more likely to get clients, because the planters knew he would return to his interests upriver—and would not do as some, take off to Mexico or the United States with the money. Some of these youthful *entrepreneurs* became so fond of river life and found it so much more exciting and profitable than farming, that they remained on the rivers, keeping "model farms" and developing a career as rivermen. It is many of these men who were later to be the captains of steamboats, purchased through investors, or through an accumulation of saved cash.

The most usual means of traveling the rivers was the raft. This was nothing more than a series of logs bound together. The bales and bundles were secured to the flat surface with ropes and covered over by various means—economical tree bark, or the more desirable canvas.

Superior to the raft was the flatboat, which was essentially flat surface with sides and a roof of timbers. Ordinarily the wood was hewn, squared off, and left rough; the roof was of long members which were water bent and made an excellent shelter from the elements.³ Beneath the roof was principally a freight area, but also a tiny cabin with a hearth for a fire, the smoke of which escaped through a hole in the roof. Squarened and box-like, the flatboat was kept in the current and off the riverbank by long, tough poles, which, like giant toothpicks, served to push the boat away from dangerous obstructions. For flatboats there was no turning back and there was no stopping, except by a gentle guiding into a marsh, a sandbar, a riverbank, or by throwing a rope to someone on the shore who could immediately fix the rope to a tree as anchor.⁴ The flatboat never made the return trip upriver, but was sold, for sometimes as high as thirty dollars, for the lumber it contained. A boat fifty feet long by fifteen feet wide could be employed in building a house, if for nothing else than the strong framing timbers. Old Sabine Pass and present-day Galveston had houses built of flatboats, and I know of at least one upcountry

house which shows the traces of nautical ancestry, but whether it is flatboat or keelboat, I do not know.

The keelboat was a more sophisticated proposition than a flatboat. It was built to last. The best keelboat description I've ever heard was that it was like a "little Noah's Ark." Truly the keelboat resembled an ark with its fat, bulbous sides and its rounded, pointing ends. It had a full cabin with windows (not glass, of course), and a ponderous freight section. Its roof was of the same bent timbers as had the flatboats. There was a huge, removable rudder, which could be attached at either end. While poles were still used at troublesome times, the rudder solved myriad problems, particularly that of keeping the boat in the current.⁵ The downriver journey of the keelboat was virtually the same as the flatboat, only simpler. Where three men were a minimum crew for a flatboat, two men could operate the keelboat on its downriver trip. The upriver passage, however, was an adventure within itself. Crews were not hard to obtain—usually the flatboatmen wanted the job for free passage home. The keelboat was emptied of upcountry cotton, corn, and tobacco, and filled with store-bought goods. Ordinarily the riverman's farmer clients had given him lists of merchandise he could obtain for them and subtract the price from the cotton money, or attach it to their account at this or that business house. Filling the keelboat full of these things—calico, iron parlor stoves, plows, saddles, tin bathtubs—the arduous return began. Human power replaced that of the rivercurrent. By poling or by towing, the riverman and his crew of a minimum four, and preferable six, inched the boat back home. Poling involved using the long, strong poles and pushing the boat with them by standing at certain spots on the deck and fixing the poles against the riverbottom. A man on the shore kept a rope taut between the boat and a tree, so as not to lose any of the laborous advance. When towing was possible, the riverbank being treeless, the crew pulled the vessel by means of long ropes. The keelboat was kept as far into the fringes of the current as safety would allow; near the shore were calmer waters, hence less strain from the opposing thrust of the river. At best the work was incomparably hard and involved constant attention, except when the boat was tied up for the night. One faulty move, the drop of a rope, the break of a pole, and the entire keelboat and crew could saunter into the current and began falling downriver wildly in disarray.

It was perhaps in the keelboat that the Texas riverman first identified himself. A keelboat man was referred to as "captain" and he willingly assumed the role and dressed the part; he invariably named his vessel the *Jasper*, the *Ship of State*, the *Rosaltha*, the *Rock and Rye*—and he was proud of her. Sometimes he painted her—blue, red, yellow, or white, and if he was very ingenious he usually experimented with attaching a great sail to her. The sails did not work on the narrow Texas rivers, it seems to be universally recorded.

Steamboats did not end the era of the flatboat and the keelboat, but they permanently thinned out those vessels, which had dominated the rivers throughout the 1830's. Steamboating added an aura of sophistication to the upcountry woods which had not been there before. Now it was

possible to travel to Galveston in comfort, if not great style; it was possible to almost eliminate the risk of losing cotton in overturns and break-ups, by shipping aboard the fine riverboats. Rivermen became businessmen, and made money in quantities they had not previously believed possible. Coastal products became available to the backwoodsmen, as were imports, shipped to Galveston aboard one of many schooners—the *Eclipse*, the *American Trader*, the *Waterwitch*, the *Only Son*.⁸ From Galveston the goods could safely travel the Sabine, the Trinity, the Brazos, the Neches, to the upland cabins, unharmed and with minimal danger. It was worth even the heavy tariffs of the Republic of Texas to have luxuries which one had not seen in a decade.

The first steamer whistle heard in the piney woods was at Gaines Ferry in 1837. Captains Wright and Delmore took their *Velocipede* a one hundred twenty-five-foot steamboat, up the Sabine in a pioneering and money-making venture. By May of 1839, steamboats plied the Sabine regularly. On New Year's Day 1840 the *Rufus Putnam* left Galveston Island for Gaines Ferry under the sponsorship of J. Temple Doswell, Esquire, who announced that "parties desiring to attend the sale of lots at Sabine City" could depend upon the boat leaving at the appointed time."⁹

The *Yellowstone* penetrated the Brazos backwaters as early as 1834 and steamed as far inland as Washington-on-the-Brazos. It was reserved purely for high water, however, as at least one steamer found herself stranded for many months because of the dropping water level. The *Laura* also appeared on the Brazos in the early 1830s; this famous steamer was the first to climb Buffalo Bayou as far as the city of Houston, and her trip was performed not long after the Battle of San Jacinto.¹⁰

The town of Liberty was for years the highest connection available on the plantation-banked Trinity. Liberty was sixty-six miles by water from the Gulf and one hundred forty-three miles from Galveston Island. Five hundred bales was considered a rather average cargo on the Trinity, and the cargoes sometimes rose to fifteen hundred bales aboard one boat. By the same token, five thousand barrels is a maximum recorded cargo on that river—the freight was one dollar and a half per wet barrel and one dollar per dry barrel.¹¹ In 1839 *Correo* traveled to the town of Carolina, two hundred miles up the Trinity from the Gulf; in the next year the steamer *Trinity* made a record five hundred mile trip to the hamlet of Alabama.¹² Regular passage those long distances varied as years went by, according to the demand.

Of the Colorado River we know very little, except that it was not desirable for steamboat travel. In 1840 the *Swan* was at Matagorda claiming to have journeyed up the Colorado to LaGrange—we don't know whether she did or not. We do know that the *Betty Powell* was built at LaGrange in 1853 from riverbottom timbers. A great barbecue was held and "dinner on the ground" to celebrate the launching of the *Betty Powell*. She was launched in the grandest country style, but proved too big for the river, and never again saw the fair fields of LaGrange, but was used on other rivers for twenty-five years.¹³

The Neches River was a late arrival to the river trade, where steamboats were concerned. The Neches and the Angelina were ideally suited for flatboats and keelboats, causing no pressing demand for steamers. So it was not until 1848 that the first steamboat arrived at Bevilport, the principal riverport of Jasper County, where the Angelina poured into the Neches, two hundred forty miles by river from the Gulf of Mexico. Throughout the 1850s the *Sunflower* claimed most of the Neches trade. She was followed in 1866 by the *Camargo*, and finally the *Laura*, whose brilliant career was ended in the 1890s by log jams in the river. This *Laura* is not to be confused with the one previously described. The *Laura* had a well-documented life, and we might consider her typical of the riverboats, which changed very little from the eighteen thirties to the eighteen seventies, in which decade they began their decline. On the Mississippi the *Laura* would not have been considered anything mentionable; for a Texas river, her credentials were different. She was one hundred fifteen feet long, thirty-two feet of beam. Her two levels of docks were well-made, glowing under a coat of white paint. On the upper deck were lines of green louvered doors which led to the passenger cabins and the saloon. She was a stern-wheeler, and on each side in flowery letters was painted her name. The cabins are described as "tiny and well made with mahogany and brass fittings." In the saloon were upholstered armchairs, sofas, a cumbersome Empire sideboard, pictures, mirrors, a square-grand piano, and a long cloth-covered table with chairs pulled up to it. An uncovered staircase led from the second deck to the first level, where there was a huge storage area for freight. She was primarily a freight boat, with capacity of six hundred bales, and without the cotton, seventeen hundred barrels, and "several hundred" boxes. She could make the trip from her home port of Bevilport to the destination of Sabine Pass in twenty-two days. The mate made forty dollars per month; the deckhands averaged twenty-five dollars per month. She was owned by a corporation of five investors.¹²

Steamboat captains were rarely part-time rivermen, for the incomes from steamers were so large and so varied that the boats were taken downriver as often as possible. Contracts for shipping to backwoods storekeepers brought substantial profits, in addition to shipping for individual farmers and the money made from passenger fares. In Galveston, the mecca for the rivermen, captains met at their favorite haunts—Francois' Hotel, built in a wrecked ship and advertising a "French Criolla" cook; the Warsaw Hotel, with its celebrated baths; the Tremont House with its legendary cocktails; and for the wilder side of life, the Monroe Edwards Saloon, Hotel, and Dance Hall, which specialized in "Sailors, Adventurers, and Sharps." In the company of schooner masters and the captains of great Gulf boats like the *New York* and the *Lafitte*, backwoods steamer captains made advantageous deals on purchasing goods and shipping their clients' cotton at special rates to New Orleans, Boston, New York, the West Indies, and Liverpool.¹³

While the flatboatman and the keelboatman sometimes retired to rural dignity, the steamboat captain was rarely satisfied with the placid life on the land, the Farmer's Almanac, and cotton growing in the fields. He grew accustomed to having money in his pocket and he liked to stay out

of debt, unless he found a good buy on a steamboat. Steamboats became his life. A Jasper County riverman jeopardized his hard-earned security of a farm to make the big splash and buy an eleven thousand dollar steamboat. That was the *Laura*. The Kennedy Brothers risked a fortune to prove a point in taking their *Lost Heir* on an eight month, eight hundred ninety-three mile trip to Dallas from Galveston. They arrived in May of 1868, and their only satisfaction was to have opened the Trinity River's upper reaches to navigation.

The riverman's world came to an end not with crescendo, but slowly and indefinitely. Railroads, to begin with, lessened the demand for riverboats, and this became more evident as the nineteenth century wore into its last decades. Log jams became an obstruction which in some cases blocked the rivers for as much as three months at a time, imprisoning the riverboats at upcountry landings, or serving as a barrier to keep them from returning home. In comparison to the railroads, riverboats were slow and not as safe; in convenience, the vessels could not compete. The log jams of the 1880's merely completed the picture. Surrendering, some rivermen turned to the sawmills for careers, others went to the land and planted, retaining only the title "captain" to associate them with the past. As the times changed, so the emphasis upon waterways changed, and the little river-stops rotted away, losing population and life to cities on railroads and highways.

The river people's world today clings to abandoned, weed-choked waterfronts and manuscripts stuffed into forgotten places. Because their physical traces are so sparse—at best, it is difficult to sense the riverman's place in nineteenth century Texas.

NOTES

¹Andrew F. Smyth to Geo. W. Smyth, Esq., Moulton, Alabama, April 14, 1835. Cited in William Seale, *Texas Riverman: The Life and Times of Captain Andrew Smyth*. Austin: the University of Texas Press, 1966.

²A sampling of materials on this may be found in *Ashbel Smith MS.*, University of Texas Archives; *George W. Smyth MS.*, University of Texas Archives; *John Salmon Ford MS.*, University of Texas Archives; *Gail Borden's Customshouse Notebook*, Rosenberg Library, Galveston; *George West MS.*, Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina; *Eugene Marshall MS.*, Duke University Library; Max Freund (ed.), *Gustav Dresel's Houston Journal*, Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1954; Eugene Hollon and Ruth L. Butler (eds.), *William Bollaert's Texas*, Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1956.

³Flatboat notes of Capt. Andrew Smyth, dated Bevilport and Walnut Run Plantation, Texas, 1843-1850, cited in *Texas Riverman*.

⁴*Ibid.*, notes on an improvement survey of the Neches and Angelina rivers (up to Indian Creek Shoal), dated 1859 and 1875; *Ibid.*, newspaper clipping dealing with river obstructions, obviously a 19th century newspaper, but undated; *Ben Stuart MS.*, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

⁵The classic keelboat is described and pictured in Leland D. Baldwin's *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters*, Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1941, certainly the most authoritative account published to date. A simple drawing in Captain Andrew Smyth's papers indicates great similarity between the boats Baldwin describes and illustrates and those used in Texas, the latter ones being perhaps more narrow. The Smyth diagram is undated, and is in his unpublished manuscripts.

⁶*Ben Stuart MS.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸An account of both vessels is found in William R. Hogan, *The Texas Republic*, Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1946.

⁹*Ben Stuart MS.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Seale, *Texas Riverman*, pp. 144-159.

¹³*Ben Stuart MS.*; *Day Book of Doctor Dyer, MS.*, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.