A STEAMBOAT

Clat Pinkelman, of rural Hartington, discovered a steamboat on the Missouri River earlier this year. (Photo by Mary Ann Hoehelheinrich)
They were marvelous contraptions, a grand way to travel — until the river reached up, took hold, and refused to let go.

BY MARITA PLACEK
CLINT PINKELMAN isn’t likely to forget March 12, 2004. That’s the day the Missouri River smiled and favored him with a glimpse into the depths of its past.

Pinkelman, a young farmer from Hartington, was drifting along with the current, enjoying his first spring outing on the Missouri, when he came upon an object sticking out of the water on the south side of Goat Island. He thought he’d found parts of an old bridge at first, but a closer inspection revealed the skeleton of a riverboat partially buried in the sand. Only a portion of the boat was visible so it was difficult to estimate the size; he thought it might be anywhere from 100-160 feet long, and about 30 feet wide.

A huge cottonwood stump was at the bow of the boat, which may offer a clue to its demise. “It looks like it hit a big snag in the river, went down, and never moved again,” Clint says. Harvesting trees along the river’s edge to fuel the steamboat boilers probably created that particular snag. When the river channel shifted, stumps were left to lurk beneath the surface and tear through the hulls of unsuspecting boats. Other snags were trees which fell into the river when the bank was undercut during flooding. These were then carried downriver by the current until they sunk or hung up on a sandbar.

Clint called his parents, Rick and Mary Pinkelman, but it was too late in the day for them to go see the riverboat. While they believed him, he had trouble convincing others. “Many people didn’t believe me when I tried to tell them what I found,” he says. The following Sunday some of Clint’s cousins accompanied him to see the remains for themselves. They took a camera along and snapped pictures of corroded metal pieces, the timbers (ribs) of the wooden hull and the snag it hit.

Now that they had actually seen the riverboat, it had their full attention. They researched information online to determine which of the twelve wrecked riverboats between Yankton and Sioux City this one might be. A promising lead showed it might be the North Alabama, which was returning from a trip to the Montana gold fields when it struck a snag and sank on October 27, 1870. The captain was Grant Marsh, one of the best known and sought after captains on the Mighty Mo. They also discovered the Alabama had surfaced in 1906, and again in 1934.

Shortly after Clint discovered the wreck, he returned to the site with Derrick Iles and Tim Cowman from the S.D. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Larry Bradley, professor of anthropology, and Brian Molyneaux, director of the Archaeology Department, from the University of South Dakota at Vermillion. The group was dismayed to find the river had already risen far enough to cover the remains. They used a handheld Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver to record the coordinates so they could relocate the site.

Although the team was thrilled by the opportunity to view the skeletal remains, they were not that surprised to hear of Pinkelman’s discovery. Bradley and Molyneaux had discovered a 26-foot timber a mile or two below the site in the fall of 2003. They believed it was used to hold the paddle wheel of a riverboat, and had searched for the craft it came from without success. As for the wreck’s identity, they didn’t agree with Clint’s contention that it is the North Alabama. Their theory is that the Alabama went down much closer to Vermillion. A bend just southwest of there was named North Alabama after the accident, but the bend and the river have moved so much since that time no one knows for sure where those remains lay. They do agree the boat was a double-rudder paddle-wheel boat from the late 1800s, however. “What’s interesting about the wreck is that the boat did-
n’t appear to be salvaged,” Bradley says.
“T don’t know why [it wasn’t sal-
vaged], but it’s a good bet that it wasn’t worth the cost,” says Jim Peterson, a retired professor from USD. “T don’t know what her cargo was, if any. Salvage is usually a very costly thing, and the rewards are uncertain at best. Any salvage effort would be expensive.”

One theory has it that this could be the remains of a military steamboat, the Morrow, a ferry built in Brownsville, Pennsylvania. When the Morrow arrived at Atchison, Kansas, in 1861, the government used it to send supplies upriver to Ft. Randall. Piloted by "Bill" Reed, under Captain Challiss, the boat made it to within seventy miles of Yankton, then ran into a snag and sank. Only the machinery was saved. Professor Bradley is working on the theory that perhaps this is the Morrow.

Beyond its identity, there also arises the question of the wreck’s ownership. Will it belong to Pinkelman, who found it? Is the wreck considered part of the river or part of the land? Which state has the better claim? Nebraska law says the state extends from the bank to the center of the river. According to South Dakota law, the bed of the river is owned by the state of South Dakota.

“It’s hard to say where the border is,” states George Berndt, of the National Park Service in Yankton. “The boundary of the two states might go to the middle of the channel, but does it stay there, or does it shift with the river when the channel changes? The property of the landowner goes to the high water bank. There is a strong possibility that the ruins of the riverboat rest on the Nebraska side of the river.”

Goat Island, located north and east of the tiny village of St. James, Nebraska, hasn’t received this much attention in 200 years—not since Private George Shannon, youngest member of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, was sent there to find stray horses and he himself became lost for sixteen days. “No one has ever laid claim to Goat Island. The land was never ceded by the government, and that is now being researched,” says Paul Hedren, Superintendent of the Missouri National Recreational River in O’Neill.
"That matter has been sitting in the hands of the court for the past three years, and we are waiting to hear the court’s decision. Several options are available. Goat Island could go to the National Park Service, which would give us a green light to clean it up and make it better for everyone, or it could go to the Interior Bureau of Land Affairs. It could remain federal public land. Perhaps South Dakota or Nebraska will be the owner, or it could possibly become a wildlife management area."

FUR TRAPPERS and traders had plied the Missouri for at least two decades before the Lewis & Clark expedition, but their reports of abundant beaver and other fur-bearing animals dramatically increased the traffic. Although boats were the safest, surest way to get a season’s accumulation of pelts to market, only so much cargo could be man-handled downriver. That limitation was overcome in 1832 when the steamboat Yellowstone traveled to Fort Tecumseh, known today as Fort Pierre, and brought out more than a hundred boat-men could have carried. For the next forty years, until the railroads arrived, riverboats remained the fastest, easiest way into Dakota Territory. They carried freight, mail, homesteaders, military troops and miners to gold camps in the Black Hills and Montana.

The first boats on the Missouri were sidewheelers, driven by paddlewheels on each side, but these were not a practical design because the river channel was too narrow in many places. A new style boat, using just one paddlewheel at the stern of the vessel, was adapted for travel on the Missouri. Most of these stern-wheelers had two decks, but some of the larger boats sported three. Regulations required every steamboat to carry one captain, two pilots, two engineers and a mate; the number of crew and firemen varied with the size of the boat.

Wood provided the power for steamboats, and their appetite was voracious: they burned a cord, a stack 4 x 4 x 4 feet, every hour. It wasn’t possible to carry enough wood for a full trip, so gathering and maintaining an ample supply was an ongoing problem for steamboat captains. In the early years they would stop near a stand of trees and the crew would go ashore to cut what they needed. As traffic became more regular, entrepreneurs would cut and stack wood in piles on shore to sell to the riverboats. A cord varied in cost from $2.25 to as much as $16.00, depending on the location and availability.

Far West, one of the best known boats on the river, was built in Pittsburgh in 1870 for $24,000. She lasted eighteen years, which was somewhat unusual: five years was the average life span of a riverboat on the upper Missouri. Usually a boat paid for itself by the end of the first year. If no serious accidents occurred during the next few years, the owner could make a tidy profit.

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— Clint Pinkelman

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Far West was a small boat, 189 feet long and 33 feet wide, with one deck, two engines, and three boilers. Among other tasks, she carried military supplies to the Yellowstone country during the Indian wars of the 1870s, and played a part in the most famous battle of that era. Captain Grant Marsh picked up wounded soldiers after the Little Big Horn and ferried them to Ft. Abraham Lincoln, covering 700 miles in 54 hours—a record never broken or equaled.

Even at their fastest, riverboats could never compete with railroads: trains could move freight faster and cheaper, and were available year-round. When the Missouri was frozen through the winter months, steamboats could do nothing but sit on shore. There was still a niche for river boats through the 1870s, but this grew smaller and smaller as time passed. In an ironic twist, the river itself dealt a devastating blow to riverboats.

After a particularly harsh winter in 1881, the spring thaw sent water and ice rushing downriver in a torrent. Two of the eleven steamboats wintering at Yankton, Western and Fontenelle, were completely destroyed. Peninab was washed ashore, and the Nellie Peck ended up on railroad tracks some 3,700 feet from the river. She didn’t touch water again until late July.

The same flood carved a new river channel below Yankton, cutting through the big bend above Vermillion and shortening the river course by 17 miles. Alas, there were fewer and fewer boats to take advantage of the change. Josephine, under the command of Captain Leach, was the last working commercial steamboat on the Missouri River. She continued delivering freight between Running Water and Sioux City until 1907, when government inspectors declared her unsafe. On her final trip to berth at Running Water she stopped at Yankton, a melancholy visit that signaled the end of a rich and exciting era in which such mighty boats did their part in settling the West.

Historians believe the stretch of river from Yankton to below Vermillion contains the remains of several riverboats embedded in the sand and silt of the river bed. For now, Clint Pinkelman’s discovery has rejoined them. It is once again hidden beneath the waters of the Missouri. In one sense, that’s a good thing.

“Preservation of the remains is very important,” says Jim Peterson. “The only thing that preserved the timbers is the fact that they were submerged. If those old timbers were pulled out of the water, they would dry out and deteriorate in the open air.” Solving the mystery of the identity of that particular boat will have to wait.

“I think that [the wreck] is going to be a wonderful curiosity that periodically surfaces as the movement of the sands covers and uncovers it, and as the channel of the river changes,” says Paul Hedren. “It has been there years upon years, decades on decades, encapsulated by the sand, and once in a blue moon the water drops and we get to see it. I think that is its legacy to us.”

Marita Placek lives on a farm near Lynch, Nebraska.