Thanks to continued lower discharges of the Missouri River, more has become visible of the final remains of a 19th century steamboat which sank near Goat Island. Researchers are scurrying to take advantage of historic low water levels in studying the boat. However, the window of opportunity will start closing today (Thursday) as the Corps of Engineers raises the discharge from the recent 9,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) to 10,500 cfs.

Researchers Scurry To Study Wreckage

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF
randy.dockendorf@yankton.net

CEDAR COUNTY, Neb. — A grand ghost of the Missouri River has emerged from her watery grave to give modern-day explorers a clue to her past.

Researchers are taking advantage of the lowest Missouri River levels in about 30 years to learn more about a 19th century steamboat that sank more than 130 years ago near present-day Goat Island.

The National Park Service and two University of South Dakota anthropologists teamed up Wednesday to explore the remains of an exposed hull. Based on historical records, the steamboat sank in the 1860s or 1870s.

However, a debate exists on which one of two possible steamboats this might be, said Paul Hedren, superintendent of the Missouri National Recreational River.

“Some call it the Morrow, others think it’s the North Alabama,” he said. “It’s part of the conversation among archaeologists and historians about what they ought to do. They want to give the boat a proper name and purpose.”

Because of the rise and fall of the river, the steamboat has become visible several times since its sinking, Hedren said. After the river fell this past year, the water was expected to rise again and submerge the boat for decades.

However, water discharges at Gavins Point Dam near Yankton have remained at 9,000 cubic feet per second (cfs), offering an unprecedented chance to learn more about what remains of the boat, Hedren said.

“This boat was not supposed to be seen for another 20 to 30 years,” he said. “We have a unique window of opportunity with the water this low.”

But the window will start closing today (Thursday), as the Corps plans to raise its discharge to 10,500 cfs. In turn, the water will claim more of the boat.
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“One of our men thought the discharges would go up to 11,000 cfs very soon, which would leave us with half of what we were looking at (Wednesday),” Hedren said. “Then it will go to 13,000 cfs, and the whole thing will be submerged.”

That’s why officials must act immediately, said Larry Bradley, who teamed on site Wednesday with fellow USD anthropologist Brian Molyneaux.

“We are looking at aerial photos or physically mapping it with surveying equipment,” Bradley said. “There is a chance that one of the government agencies will have divers. They have people who are used to working under adverse conditions.”

Bradley said he and Molyneaux have visited the site several times. However, the low water levels — teamed with unseasonably warm temperatures and no ice or snow — have created prime exploration.

“We have already started our work with 3-D images, re-creating the hull,” Bradley said.

The USD officials literally walked the plank Wednesday, Hedren said. “One of the guys from USD walked and counted planks from stem to stern,” he said.

In the 19th century, steamboats carried commercial items to the Northern Plains, Hedren said. The upstream journeys served early settlements like Yankton as well as the military and passengers headed for the Montana gold rush, he said.

“There is the local legend that any boat was a gold carrier,” he said. “Records suggest that when the boat went down, no lives were lost, and they immediately salvaged everything.”

However, gold was not likely part of the load, Bradley said. “It wasn’t a treasure trove. There was no big cargo,” he said.

As for the boat’s identity, Bradley said he leans toward the North Alabama, which was built in 1864 and reportedly snagged and sank Oct. 27, 1870. The Morrow was believed lost in 1861, he said.

Historical sources say the North Alabama fits the Goat Island boat’s dimension of 160 feet long and 32 feet wide, Bradley said.

“The North Alabama reportedly sunk in a specific location, which fits where this occurred. The snap is more than likely,” he said. “The records said it sank in October, when the river level was low and before they regulated the river.”

The North Alabama was captured at one time by Grant Marsh, who later — as captain of the Far West — brought back survivors from the Little Big Horn. However, Marsh was not captain of the boat during the 1870 wreck, Bradley said.

Steamboat travel was dangerous at any time because of the river’s wild conditions, Bradley said. “It was so dangerous that a good trip up from St. Louis would pay for the boat. But there was no other way to get materials up there,” he said.

The current activity is focused on research, not on any plans to remove the boat, Hedren said.

“We have no plans to raise it, because then it would utterly disintegrate,” he said. “There is no practical way of preserving a water-soaked timber and allowing it to dry. It would flake up and powdery up in your hands.”

While the boat contains no gold, the research has turned up a wealth of insight into boat-making of the 19th century, Bradley said. Fortunately, the hull has remained upright rather than upside-down, he said.

“It’s a remarkable feat, how they built one of these things,” he said. “A lot of these boats carried 30 people or more, but there are reports that some of these vessels could carry hundreds of passengers.”

The sunken boat, which reportedly weighed 269 tons, was made of oak and built by hand, Bradley said. The boat-makers used four-inch planks, a foot wide and 60 feet long. The hull was close to three inches thick.

“In Yankton itself during that time period, they pulled these boats out of the water with something called ‘ways,’” he said. “They were able to pull up to 300-ton vessels out of the water. All they had were a few horses and a few steam engines.”

While detailed plans don’t exist for the sunken boat, Bradley said watercraft of that era were massive. The fact becomes even more amazing in light of the limited tools available at that time, he said.

The boatbuilders of that time also showed incredible patience compared to today’s standards, Bradley said.

“People’s concept of time — they would think about it in much different ways. Immediate gratification was getting something within a month,” he said with a chuckle.

Records indicate the Missouri River dropped to similarly-low levels in 1906 and 1934, Bradley said. The current historic water levels have brought out people seeking to take advantage of the exposed boat, he said.

“The big problem is that people tend to look at these boats as some sort of resource or souvenir,” he said. “I have heard reports that pieces of the boat were sold on eBay. There was an ad in the Sioux City Journal selling some of the metal parts.”

Federal law protects submerged boats in navigable water, and federal agencies watch the site, Hedren said. People should limit themselves to a close-up view of the boat’s remains, he said.

“At 9,000 cfs, the river is as low as it’s going to get,” he said. “It’s a brilliant opportunity to see a little piece of 19th century Americana.”