Local farmers may have found steamboat from late 1800s

By Jesse Claeyss
Journal staff writer

OBERT, Neb. — In an area where horse-drawn covered wagons grace highway signs, one more glimpse into days past could be seen peeking out from the cloudy brown waters of the Missouri River on Saturday.

Mostly submerged in the river on the north side of Goat Island, or about 8 miles north of Obert, a Nebraska village populated by 47 souls, one could see what remained of what scholars believe was once a wooden steamboat from the late 1800s.

“I had no idea what it was when I first came up on it. I though maybe it was a old bridge or something,” Clint Pinkelman, a 24-year-old hog farmer from Hartington, Neb., said. “I started to look at it a little better and realized it was an old boat.”

Pinkelman, who was recreating on the river, immediately called his father, Rick, and told him about the discovery. Word started to spread among Pinkelman’s circle of family and friends, and numerous rides to the site and Internet research followed.

This particular corps of discovery came up with a guess that the approximately 170-foot-long deteriorating wood hull belonged to the North Alabama, a 220-ton vessel that sank on Oct. 27, 1870. Pinkelman decided it was time to call in some big guns.

On Saturday morning, Pinkelman and his father met three steamboat wreck experts at a recreation area north of Obert. South Dakota Department of Environment and Natural Resources geologist Derrie Iles, DENR administrator Tim Cowman and University of South Dakota professor of anthropology Larry Bradley, along with...
Steamboat found in river
continued from page 1

the Pinklemans, boarded a johnboat at 10 a.m. and set sail for the wreck site.

Braving the high winds and a somewhat crowded vessel, they reached the site and were a little disappointed with what they saw. “The river must have come up about a foot since last week,” Pinkleman said. It was a week and only one day ago Pinkleman first found the wreck. At that time about 3 feet of the wooden boat could be seen, but now the roughly 35-footwide wooden hull was nearly fully submerged again under the river with a depth of about 10 feet.

Using digital cameras and a handheld Global Positioning System unit, the explorers tried to record as much about the wooden beams, decking and corroding metal pieces as they could during the hour long excursion.

Bradley said the three men called in to survey the wreckage wanted to accomplish two things: to determine if the vessel was now located in the same place it sank and to assess the remains to see if an identification could be made.

The steamboat did appear to be located in its original location, Bradley said, but as to the second goal, things are as murky as the water that now cradles the wooden structure. “We have a possible identifi-

Above are artifacts salvaged from the sunken Missouri River steamboat. The item at left was believed to have been connected to the boat’s boiler. (Photo by Jesse Claeyes)

cation for it, but it is not one of the seven or so well known wrecks between Sioux City and Yankton,” Bradley said.

Between Yankton, S.D. and Sioux City, seven steamboats are believed to have wrecked while navigating the Mighty Mo. Bradley said the North Alabama is believed to be further down river than this particular wreck, sort of ruling out the Pinkleman theory.

One steamboat that was conscripted by the military sunk somewhere near the Pinkleman find, and Bradley believes it may now have been found. A new find is something that makes Bradley excited.

“This is part of the local history. It is another example of architecture of how these vessels were built, and if we can get a date on when it went down, you can look at how these boats change over time,” Bradley said.

The late 1800’s was a time of increasing boat traffic from fur traders, gold seekers and homesteaders heading via steamboats to Fort Benton, Mont., once considered the “head of navigation” on the Missouri River. Bradley said the trek was treacherous and many of the wooden steamboats lasted only a few trips.

“Most of the boats, including this one, probably sank when they hit a snag. They would come in and salvage what they could and then just let them sink,” Bradley said.

What was interesting about the wreck examined on Saturday was that the boat didn’t appear to be salvaged, Bradley said. Pinkleman had even found a metal fitting that is believed to have been connected to the boiler.

The problem is solid facts are hard to determine from a soggy sunken boat. At this point, Bradley is certain the boat is from the late 1800s and was once a double-rudder paddlewheel steamboat. He now hopes additional research and study will enable the group to pin down what vessel this actually was.

“From time to time these things show up and are exposed, so this is not that uncommon,” Bradley said, eluding to the 1981 discovery of the Western that sunk in 1881 near Yankton. “The expression is you can’t keep a good boat down.”

Jesse Claeyes can be reached at (712) 293-4221 or jesse
claeyes@siouxcityjournal.com.