Steamboat wreckage reappears

VERMILLION (AP) — It was Oct. 27, 1870. The North Alabama, chugging up the Missouri River near here, hit a sandbar and sank. But that’s not the end of the tale of this formerly submerged steamboat.

Parts of the North Alabama recently reappeared on a sandbar near the Myron Grove Lake Access area west of Vermillion. Now, researchers from the University of South Dakota and the National Park Service are collecting data about the cargo boat.

“We work throughout the world with submerged wrecks,” Larry Murphy of the NPS’s Submerged Resources Center of Santa Fe, N.M., said. “A lot of the North Alabama is exposed but we are treating this like an underwater site. We want to recover as much information as we can.”

“The North Alabama sunk in 1870, and it was built in the 1860s (in Pittsburgh),” Larry Bradley of USD’s anthropology department in the Keel. “It went by several names over the years, but after it sank, most of the usable equipment was salvaged.”

Bradley said few historical records remain but that a newspaper article said it came back up above the water in 1890 because of the river levels. “Every bar in Vermillion cleared because they were certain there would be prime aged whiskey in the keel,” he said.

It became visible in the 1930s and then was covered with sand again. This past year it was exposed again. Bradley said.

The steamboat sank because it hit a sandbar and became stuck after a matter of hours, he said. “It is now embedded within the sandbar, which is interesting because the process that caused it to sink is also the process that has allowed it to exist,” Bradley said.

The boat’s captain was Grant Marsh. “He has ties to the area and is most notable as the captain of the Far West,” said Bradley.

The researchers are using remote-sensing equipment that can map structures that may still be embedded in the sandbar. They also are using global positioning systems to measure and diagram the steamboat’s remains.

“We will complete a report and pictures and also complete some professional literature,” Murphy said. “This really is a remarkable look at a piece of history and the park service and the university are working in partnership to make this information commonly available to the community.”

Steamboats are important to the area’s history because they were not just a mode of transporting goods but a vital resource for everyone who lived along the Missouri, Murphy said.

“Steamboats were fundamental to life and existence,” he said. “A steamboat this size would burn 20 cords of wood every 24 hours, so it would stop continually to pick up wood, deliver letters and utilize goods and services available in the area. It was really a part of the settlement and activity of the whole area.”

There are no plans to remove the ship.

The stern of a riverboat protrudes from a sand bar in the Missouri River near Vermillion as Art Ireland, a member of the National Park Service’s Submerged Resources Center, walks along the sand on Thursday. Because of low water levels, the wreck, which is thought to be that of the North Alabama that hit a snag and sunk in 1870, is visible. A team of divers from the park service has been using the opportunity to survey and catalog the wreck.

“Salvaging something like this would take a considerable amount of resources in terms of funding and the physical act of preservation,” Bradley said. “Actually removing it would be buying into a long project, and even with the preservation tools available, there is no certainty it would be preserved for another 100 years.”

Murphy said the steamboat is available for view.

“Information from Yankton Press and Dakota