The Keelboat Age on Western Waters. By Leland D. Baldwin. (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1941. xiv, 268 p. Maps, illustrations.)

Here, in eight swiftly flowing chapters, is the turbulent story of river transportation in the Mississippi Valley prior to the steamboat era. Although Pittsburgh receives the spotlight and the Ohio Valley serves as the main stage for this colorful pageant, the Mississippi and the Missouri are not forgotten. The inclusion of such incidents as the capture of Vincennes on the Wabash during the American Revolution, the Battle of Campbell’s Island on the Upper Mississippi during the War of 1812, the great race of Manuel Lisa up the muddy Missouri in 1811, and the removal of the famous Red River raft during the 1830’s by Captain Henry Miller Shreve illustrate the far-flung nature of the “boatable waters” of the Mississippi Valley which Thomas Hart Benton and William Clark estimated in 1820 at fifty thousand miles.

In his opening chapter Dr. Baldwin discusses the rôle of the western waters in American expansion. Although primarily concerned with the keelboat, considerable space is allotted to the other types of river craft used in the Mississippi Valley from Revolutionary War days to about 1820. This is especially true when boats and boat building are discussed in chapter two. The advantages and disadvantages of such craft as the bullboat and the bateau, the birchbark canoe and the dugout, the Mackinaw boat and the flatboat, the keelboat and the barge are clearly outlined from the standpoint of cost, capacity, speed, and durability. For example, the author points out that keelboats and barges averaged about fifteen miles per day upstream, the 1950-mile voyage from New Orleans to Pittsburgh taking four months or more.

The difficulties of navigation are considered in chapter three. River guide books, such as Zadok Cramer’s Navigator and Samuel Cumings’ Western Pilot, were in wide use during the keelboat age. High and low water, the danger of snags and sandbars, the perils of navigating the Falls of the Ohio, and the “terrors of the whirlpools” in the “wicked” Mississippi all served to keep boatmen constantly on the alert. Keelboatamen and bargemen formed the most “distinct and continuous class” of all the river men; Mike Fink, Mike Wolf, James Girty, and Bill Sedley became virtually legendary among the “half horse, half alligator” figures on the Ohio and Mississippi. Wages for these
hardworking, boisterous men varied, Major Isaac Craig paying keelboatemen $12 a month in 1794 while Christian Schultz found Mississippi boatmen receiving from $25 to $40 a month in 1810.

Intensely dramatic (although less of a contribution) are the stories of river pirates and the Natchez Trace contained in chapter five. Colonel Plug, Samuel Mason of Cave-in-Rock fame, and the ubiquitous Harpe brothers are stellar players in this era of depraved villainy. The yearly departure of immigrants by flatboat down the Ohio and its tributaries was an important phase of the westward movement; the construction of such immigrant craft at Pittsburgh and the various points above and below the Forks of the Ohio was a vital factor in the growth of many towns. The building of ocean-going vessels at Marietta and other Ohio River towns seems spectacular today. Actually, Dr. Baldwin points out, only about $500,000 worth of such ships are known to have been built compared with a $150,000,000 valuation placed on western goods received at New Orleans between 1800 and 1820. The book concludes with the advent of the steamboat and the gradual shunting of keelboats to shallow streams until their final elimination by the railroad.

Dr. Baldwin has written the definitive volume on the keelboat age. The general format is in keeping with the excellent scholarship displayed throughout the book. Twenty-three illustrations and nine additional drawings, together with handsome end-cover maps, add much to this attractive volume. Generous footnotes, an extensive bibliography, and an adequate index conclude a book that will probably remain for years the authoritative account of this important era in Mississippi Valley transportation.

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Readers of this magazine will be interested to learn that publication of the territorial papers of the United States, authorized years ago by an act of Congress, goes on apace. The present volume contains the official papers lodged in the federal archives in Washington, covering the period from the transfer of the province of Louisiana to the United States in 1803, to the admission of the territory as a state in 1812. These documents present an interesting history of the territory during those nine years. All sorts of problems occurred. It was