

BOOK REVIEWS

Mr. Roosevelt's Steamboat: The First Steamboat to Travel the Mississippi. By MARY HELEN DOHAN. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1981. Pp. xiii, 194. Preface, illustrations, epilogue, notes, source material, index. \$10.95.)

In October 1811, Nicholas Roosevelt, accompanied by his wife, Lydia, and their young daughter, set out from Pittsburgh on the *New Orleans*, first steamboat on western waters, as it made its maiden voyage down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. *Mr. Roosevelt's Steamboat* is a narrative history of that journey which ended in January 1812 when the seventy-five-passenger vessel reached New Orleans. It was the opening of a new age of transportation in the American West.

Mary Helen Dohan has told an interesting story of this 2,500-mile odyssey which had a fair balance of good and bad fortunes. Beginning with the dreams of the vessel's brilliant builder, Nicholas Roosevelt, the author tells of the hopes and frustrations of those whom this experiment in steam navigation touched. First, there were Roosevelt's partners, Robert Fulton, the boat's designer, and Robert Livingston, financial backer, who wondered about the feasibility of building a steamboat for western rivers. Then there was the distinguished architect Benjamin Latrobe, who doubted Roosevelt's managerial acumen and expressed more serious reservations about his eldest daughter, Lydia, who was pregnant, making the trip. Lydia was only seventeen when she married Roosevelt; he was forty-one. Latrobe, a business associate of Roosevelt, never got over the shock.

But Lydia, a remarkable young woman, who was as devoted and reckless as Nicholas, had confidence in what her husband was doing. Unselfishly, she stayed with him to the end of the journey — a journey studded with adventure and tragedy. A cabin fire was nearly a total disaster. Hostile Indians and river pirates lurked in the shadows along the riverbanks, a constant threat. Yet it was not man who turned out to be the greatest foe. River hazards, like the Falls of the Ohio, and a devastating earthquake that rocked the entire Mississippi basin seemed orchestrated by nature for some inexplicable reason to block success. The author's vivid descriptions of these calamities are especially impressive.

Another aspect of the book that is rewarding is Dohan's treatment of the impact the construction of the *New Orleans* had on the Pittsburgh community. The city's elite, including the O'Haras, the Nevilles, and the Rosses, welcomed and entertained the Roosevelts. But it was Roosevelt's project that captured the interest of the people. For Pittsburgh was "supremely boat-conscious." Its citizens watched progress on the construction with anticipation. The merchants and manufacturers were not insensitive to the probable success that steam navigation might bring them. Nothing would please them more than to see the Mississippi become the great outlet for goods from Western Pennsylvania, thus reducing the dependency upon the East.

By skillfully interweaving her characters with historical events, the author has produced a creditable work. The emphasis is on the story, but not at the expense of the human side of her subject matter. Her characters are real, believable. She uses representative sources but refers to them in her notes in a most unusual manner. The professional historian might ask what manual of style, if any, was used. If there is a basic flaw to the work it is an overabundance of descriptive passages. Some of it burdens the reader but most of it supports the mood and setting.

In sum, this short book is a readable and enjoyable account of one of the fascinating stories associated with the early West. It should be of special appeal to those interested in Pittsburgh history, transportation, and, of course, the boat buff.

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M'Kee Victorian Glass: Five Complete Glass Catalogs from 1859/60 to 1871. Introduction and text by LOWELL INNES and JANE SHADEL SPILLMAN. (New York: Corning Museum of Glass, in association with Dover Publications, Inc., 1981. Pp. v, 186. Introduction, bibliography, charts, catalogues, pricelists. \$5.00.)

One of the most desirable tools in research and collecting is primary source material. The five catalogue-pricelists dating from 1859/60 to 1871 incorporated in this book are such tools. Although McKee and Brothers of Pittsburgh was but one of the major companies manufacturing glass tablewares in the nineteenth century, their catalogues represent the production, the terminology of the wares, and