

Roughing It on

Reuben Gold Thwaites in Western Pennsylvania

by Dan Hughes Fuller



ON FRIDAY, MAY 4, 1894, a small crowd gathered at the shipyard in Brownsville, Pa., to wish a good journey to four travelers in a 15-foot rowboat overloaded with camping equipment. In it were Reuben Gold Thwaites (head of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin), his wife Jessie, their 10-year-old son Fredrik, and Jessie's brother William Turvill. In previous years, Thwaites and Turvill had taken short boating trips together on the lakes and rivers of Wisconsin, but this summer's expedition was to be more ambitious. Starting on the Monongahela River an hour southeast of Pittsburgh, they were to cover the entire length of the Ohio River, some 1,100 miles, all the way to Cairo, Ill. As their boat *Pilgrim* pulled into the stream, someone on shore called out, "Good luck to yees, an' yet don't git th' missus drowndid 'fore ye git to Cairo!"¹ They would need the good luck very soon.

Thwaites was interested in the travels of early explorers, trappers, and land speculators in North America, and in preparation for the trip he had read all the 18th and early 19th century accounts of travel on the Ohio that he could find.² Merely covering the distance in a Pullman car on tracks paralleling the river or from the deck of a steamboat going from city to city would not satisfy him; he wanted to relive the historic experi-

Dan Hughes Fuller is a photographer, curator, and historian of photography at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. He collaborated with Robert L. Reid, vice president of academic affairs at the University of Southern Indiana, to produce the traveling exhibition "Afloat on the Ohio, 1894," at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center through December 1996. Fuller and Reid are also authors of *Pilgrims on the Ohio: The River Journey and Photographs of Reuben Gold Thwaites, 1894*, to be published in 1998 by the Indiana Historical Society. All of Thwaites' original circular photographs are held at Wisconsin's historical society in Madison and appear here by permission.

The Thwaites party camping on the Youghiogheny River near McKeesport, May 6, 1894.

the River



ence. He wrote in his published account of the trip, *Afloat on the Ohio*, that he wished “to see with his own eyes what the borderers saw; in imagination, to redress the pioneer stage and repeople it.”³ His was a historical pilgrimage, and he intended to travel as though he were a pioneer canoeist or flatboatman: rowing during the day, cooking over an open fire in the evening, and sleeping under the stars at night.

Environmental, economic, and social conditions on the river had changed since the time of the explorers, however, and they had changed the most in Western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. Now there were locks on the Monongahela at Charleroi, Walton, Braddock, and Pittsburgh to portage; hundreds of steamboats to avoid; and the general smoke and noise of the nation’s greatest manufacturing region to endure. Reuben Gold Thwaites was surprised how densely settled were the banks of the Monongahela leading up to Pittsburgh and how industry had changed the landscape:

Often, four or five full-fledged cities are at once in view from our boat, the air is thick with sooty smoke belched from hundreds of stacks, the ear is almost deafened with the whirr and roar and bang of milling industries.

Tipples of bituminous coal-shafts are ever in sight — begrimed scaffolds of wood and iron, arranged for dumping the product of the mines into both barges and railway cars.... At each tipple is a miners’ hamlet; a row of cottages or huts, cast in a common mold, either unpainted, or bedaubed with that cheap, ugly red with which one is familiar in railway bridges and rural barns. Sometimes these huts, though in the mass dreary enough, are kept in neat repair; but often are they sadly out of elbows — pigs and children promiscuously at their doors, paneless sash stuffed with rags, unsightly litter strewn around, misery stamped on every feature of the homeless tenements. Dreariest of all is a deserted mining village... the shaft having been worked out, or an unquenchable subterranean fire left to smoulder in neglect. Here the tipple has fallen into creaking decrepitude; the cabins are without windows or doors — these having been taken to some newer hamlet; ridge-poles are sunken, chimneys tottering; soot covers the gaunt bones, which for all the world are like a row of skeletons, perched high, and grinning down at you in their misery....⁴ (see photograph, Coal Tipple on the Monongahela near Clairton, May 5)

These conditions made good campsites hard to find. The first night the travelers slept comfortably enough a mile downriver from Lock No. 4 near Charleroi, but the next night Thwaites and his party, encountering the Youghiogheny River at its confluence with the Monongahela at McKeesport, rowed a mile and a half up the Youghiogheny trying to find a quiet spot away from the “pulsating whang of steel-making plants and rolling mills [that] made the air tremble” at McKeesport.⁵

The next morning, May 6, began with a thunderstorm delaying their departure until 11 a.m. (see photograph, Camp on the Youghiogheny above McKeesport, May 6), but soon they were underway, passing Braddock (see photograph, Edgar W. Thomson steel works on the Monongahela, Braddock, May 6), Lock No. 2, and Homestead. Here Thwaites came face to face with events too

recent for inclusion in history books. The Homestead Strike had been put down less than two years before, and Thwaites, consistent with his education and upbringing, favored the rights of mill owners over that of the workers. Yet, the working people of Homestead did not *look* like the murderous revolutionaries Thwaites had read about in the nation’s press:

To-day the Homesteaders are enjoying their Sunday afternoon outing along the town shore — nurses pushing baby carriages, self-absorbed lovers holding hands upon riverside benches, merry-makers rowing in skiffs or crossing the river in crowded ferries; the electric cars, following either side of the stream as far down as Pittsburg, crowded to suffocation with gayly-attired folk. They look little like rioters; yet it seems but the other day when Homestead men and women and children were hysterically reveling in atrocities akin to those of the Paris commune.⁶ (see photograph, Ferry with Sunday passengers on the Monongahela below Homestead, May 6)

In a few days, Thwaites’ sympathies would be similarly mixed 70 miles down-river from Pittsburgh in Mingo Junction, Ohio:

Three miles below Steubenville is Mingo Junction, where we are the guests of a friend who is superintendent of the iron and steel works here. The population of Mingo is twenty-five hundred. From seven to twelve hundred are employed in the works, according to the exigencies of business. Ten per cent of them are Hungarians and Slavonians — a larger proportion would be dangerous, our host avers, because of the tendency of these people to “run the town” when sufficiently numerous to make it possible. The Slavs in the iron towns come to America for a few years, intent solely on saving every dollar within reach. They are willing to work for wages which from the American standard seem low, but to them almost fabulous.... This sort of competition is fast degrading legitimate American labor. Its regulation ought not to be thought impossible.

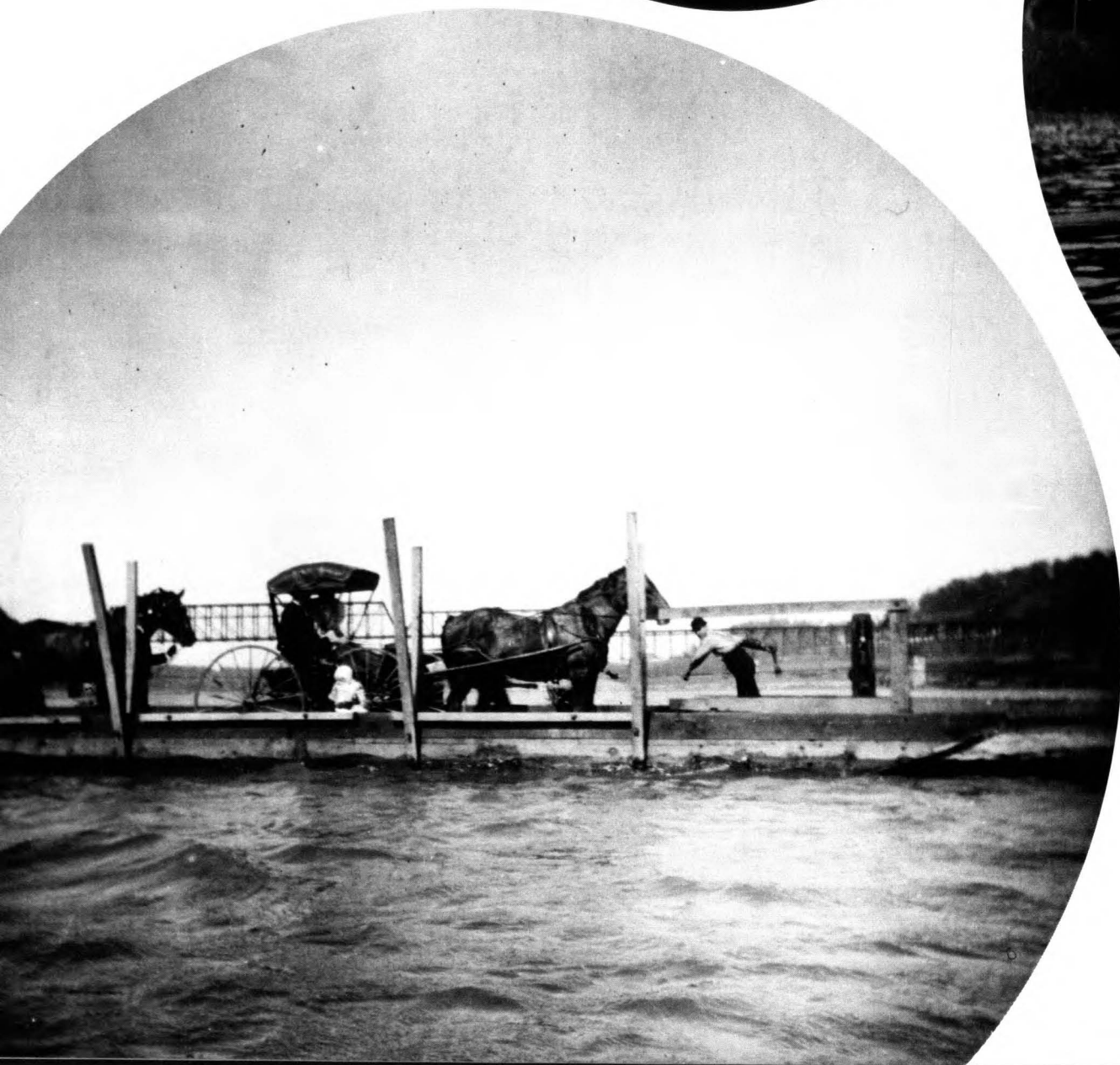
A visit to a great steel-making plant, in full operation, is an event in a man’s life. Particularly remarkable is the weird spectacle presented at night, with the furnaces fiercely gleaming, the fresh ingots smoking hot, the Bessemer converter “blowing off,” the great cranes moving about like things of life, bearing giant kettles of molten steel; and amidst it all, human life held so cheaply.... The working life of one of these men is not over ten years, B— says. A decade of this intense heat... wears a man out — “only fit for the boneyard then, sir,” was the laconic estimate of an intelligent boss whom I questioned on the subject.⁷ (see photograph, Friends seeing us off Mingo Junction, Ohio, May 10)

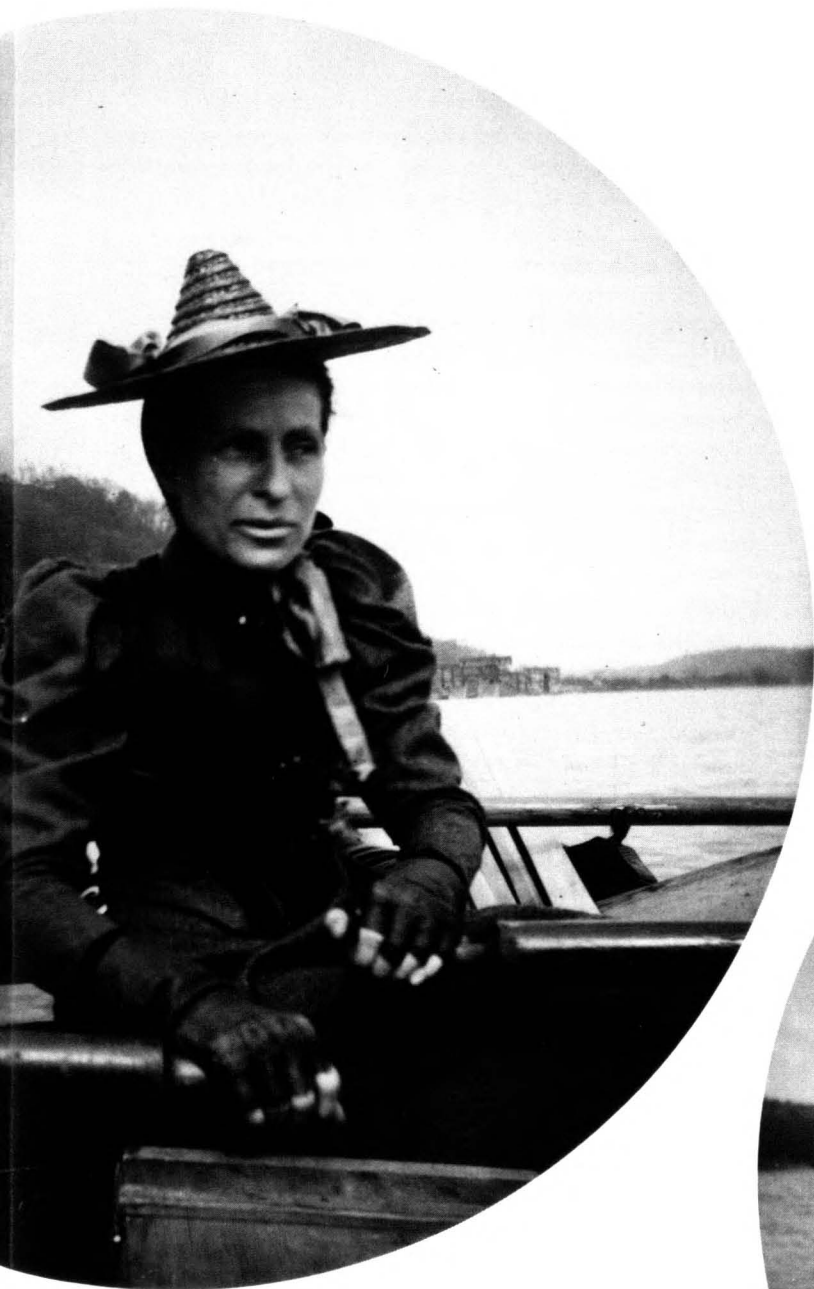
The subject of immigration would come up again even further down the river in a conversation with an Ohioan living improvidently across from Moundsville, W. Va.:

“But I tell ye, sir, th’ Italians and Hungarians is spoil’n’ this yere country fur white men; ‘n’ I do’n’ see no prospect for hits be’n’ better till they get shoved out uv ‘t!’ Yet he said that life wasn’t so hard here as it was in some parts he had heard tell of — the climate was mild, that he “lowed,” a fellow could go out and get a free bucket of coal from the hillside “back yon;” he might get all the “light wood ‘n’ patchin’ stuff” he wanted, from the river drift; could, when he “hankered after ‘em,” catch fish off his own front-door yard; and pick up a dollar now and then at odd jobs, when the rent was to be paid, or the “ol’



**Andrew Carnegie's "ET" — the
Edgar Thomson rail mill — from
the Monongahela in Braddock,
May 6, 1894.**





From bottom left: Ferry with Sunday passengers on the Monongahela at Homestead, May 6; coal tippie on the Mon near Clairton, May 5; Jessie Thwaites rowing, May 4 or 5; boys in a crude boat on the Mon below Braddock, May 6.





Friends seeing the Thwaites party off on the Ohio River downstream from Pittsburgh at Mingo Junction, Ohio, May 10.

woman" wanted a dress, or he a new coat.

This is clearly the lazy man's Paradise. I do not remember to have heard that the South Sea Islanders, in the ante-missionary days, had an easier time of it than this. What new fortune will befall my friend when he gets the Italians and Hungarians "shoved out," and "things pick up a bit," I cannot conceive.⁸

Reuben Gold Thwaites had prepared for his trip down the Ohio by studying the historical record and laboriously compiling a gazetteer of place names and historical incidents. Under "Braddock, Pennsylvania" were notes he made on the defeat of the British general in 1755, but the Carnegie Company's Edgar Thomson steel works had become an important historical force in the late 19th century, so Thwaites took a picture of it with his Kodak camera. Heavy industry fueled by cheap labor, much of it foreign, had, after all, made the Wisconsin historian's summer trip possible. *Pilgrim* was a Wisconsin boat that the technology of steel and steam had transported a thousand miles by rail to the trip's starting point in Pennsylvania.

His ambivalent or even contradictory attitudes toward the changes that industry had made on the face of the river remind us of our own. In this sense, 1894 seems little different from 1996. Americans still enjoy the convenience that technology affords, but regret the degraded environment it leaves behind. They seem to

want competitive industries producing products at low prices, but are shocked by low wages and dangerous work places. They worry, especially in election years, that foreign workers (who save their money) are taking American jobs, but suspect that Americans (often living beyond their means) are lazy.

Coming into Pittsburgh on the evening of Sunday, May 6, 1894, the whole premise of making a historic pilgrimage in a rowboat through an industrial region must have begun to seem dubious to at least some of the passengers of *Pilgrim*.

Black storm-clouds, jagged and portentous, were scurrying across the sky; and by the time we had reached the forks, where the Monongahela, in the heart of the city, joins forces with the Allegheny, *Pilgrim* was being buffeted about on a chop sea produced by cross currents and a northwest gale. She can weather an ordinary storm, but for this experience is unfitted. When a passing steamer threw out long lines of frothy waves to add to the disturbance, they broke over our gunwales; and W—with the coffee pot and the Boy with a tin basin were hard pushed to keep the water below the thwarts.⁹

Historian, wife, son, and brother-in-law escaped drowning — it turned out to be the most dangerous moment in the 38-day trip — and decided to forgo camping for a night.

Seeking the friendly shelter of a house-boat, of which there were scores tied to the left bank, we trusted our drenched luggage to the care of its proprietor, placed *Pilgrim* in a snug harbor hard by, and, hurrying up a steep flight of steps leading from the levee to the terrace above, found a suburban hotel just as its office clock struck eight.¹⁰

Thus Reuben Gold Thwaites, at least for a night, found a balance between historical authenticity and the comforts of the industrial society in which he was living.

The next day he lightened *Pilgrim's* cargo in the nearby town of Chartier by sending on ahead by express train to Cincinnati a "portly bag of conventional traveling clothes."¹¹ Thirty-five days later, in Cairo, Ill., the boat and its crew would also board a train, this time for Wisconsin, their pilgrimage ended. ☼

Notes

¹ Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Afloat on the Ohio: An Historical Pilgrimage of a Thousand Miles in a Skiff, from Redstone to Cairo* (Chicago: Way and Williams, 1897), 3. *Afloat on the Ohio* was reprinted unchanged in 1900 by Doubleday and McClure of New York and reprinted with a new title and preface in 1903 as *On the Storied Ohio* by A.C. McClurg of Chicago. *On the Storied Ohio* was itself reprinted in 1975 as part of the Arno Press of New York's Mid-American Frontier series.

² Besides the many extended historical discussions in the text of *Afloat on the Ohio*, an "Historical Outline of Ohio Valley Settlement" appears in an appendix and is followed by a "Selected List of Journals of Previous Travelers Down the Ohio" consisting of 49 entries.

³ Thwaites, xi.

⁴ Thwaites, 6-8.

⁵ Thwaites, 13-14.

⁶ Thwaites, 18.

⁷ Thwaites, 44-45.

⁸ Thwaites, 69.

⁹ Thwaites, 20-21.

¹⁰ Thwaites, 21.

¹¹ Thwaites, 22. Perhaps among these conventional traveling clothes was the interesting costume Mrs. Thwaites is seen wearing in the photographs.



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS

Fighter with a Heart

Writings of Charles Owen Rice, Pittsburgh Labor Priest

EDITED BY CHARLES J. MCCOLLESTER

"An exceedingly strong and moving book."—David Demarest

Paper \$19.95 Illustrated

Pittsburgh Surveyed

*Social Science and Social Reform in the
Early Twentieth Century*

EDITED BY

MAURINE W. GREENWALD

AND MARGO ANDERSON

The first sustained analysis of the
Pittsburgh Survey.

Paper \$22.95 Illustrated

Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh

Volume 2: The Post-Steel Era

ROY LUBOVE

The first comprehensive study of
Pittsburgh's Renaissance II.

Paper \$19.95

Also available *Volume 1: Government,
Business, and Environmental Change*,
paper \$19.95

A Wise Extravagance

*The Founding of the Carnegie
International Exhibitions,
1895-1901*

KENNETH NEAL

"A concise, intelligent, and
consistently interesting history of the
exhibitions."—David Wilkins

Paper \$14.95 Illustrated

The Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania

CHARLES MORSE STOTZ

INTRODUCTION BY

DELL UPTON

"The single most important record
for most of the finest buildings
constructed during the era in
western Pennsylvania."

—David J. Vater, *Columns*

Cloth \$60.00 Illustrated

Triumphant Capitalism

Henry Clay Frick and the Industrial

Transformation of America

KENNETH WARREN

"A detailed, carefully wrought
business biography of Henry Clay
Frick."—Van Beck Hall

Cloth \$35.00 Illustrated

Killing Time

*Leisure and Culture in
Southwestern Pennsylvania,
1800-1850*

SCOTT C. MARTIN

"Scott Martin's perspective and
sensitivity have produced a
remarkable study."—Samuel P. Hays

Cloth \$29.95 Illustrated

Stoneware of Southwestern Pennsylvania

PHIL SCHALTENBRAND

Describes the once-flourishing salt-
glazed stoneware industry of
Pennsylvania's Monongahela and
Youghiogheny valleys between 1840
and 1914.

Paper \$22.95 Illustrated

Seeing Pittsburgh

BARRINGER FIFIELD

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

MICHAEL EASTMAN

Pittsburgh comes alive in twelve
carefully crafted walking and
driving tours.

Paper \$16.95 Illustrated

New in Paper

Thomas Mellon and His Times

THOMAS MELLON

"An exceptional book by one of the
most interesting men of his time."

—David McCullough, from the
Foreword

Paper \$22.95 Illustrated

At local bookstores or direct from University of Pittsburgh Press, CUP Services, Box 6525, Ithaca NY 14851