

*Paddle-Wheel*

*Days*

IN CALIFORNIA

By

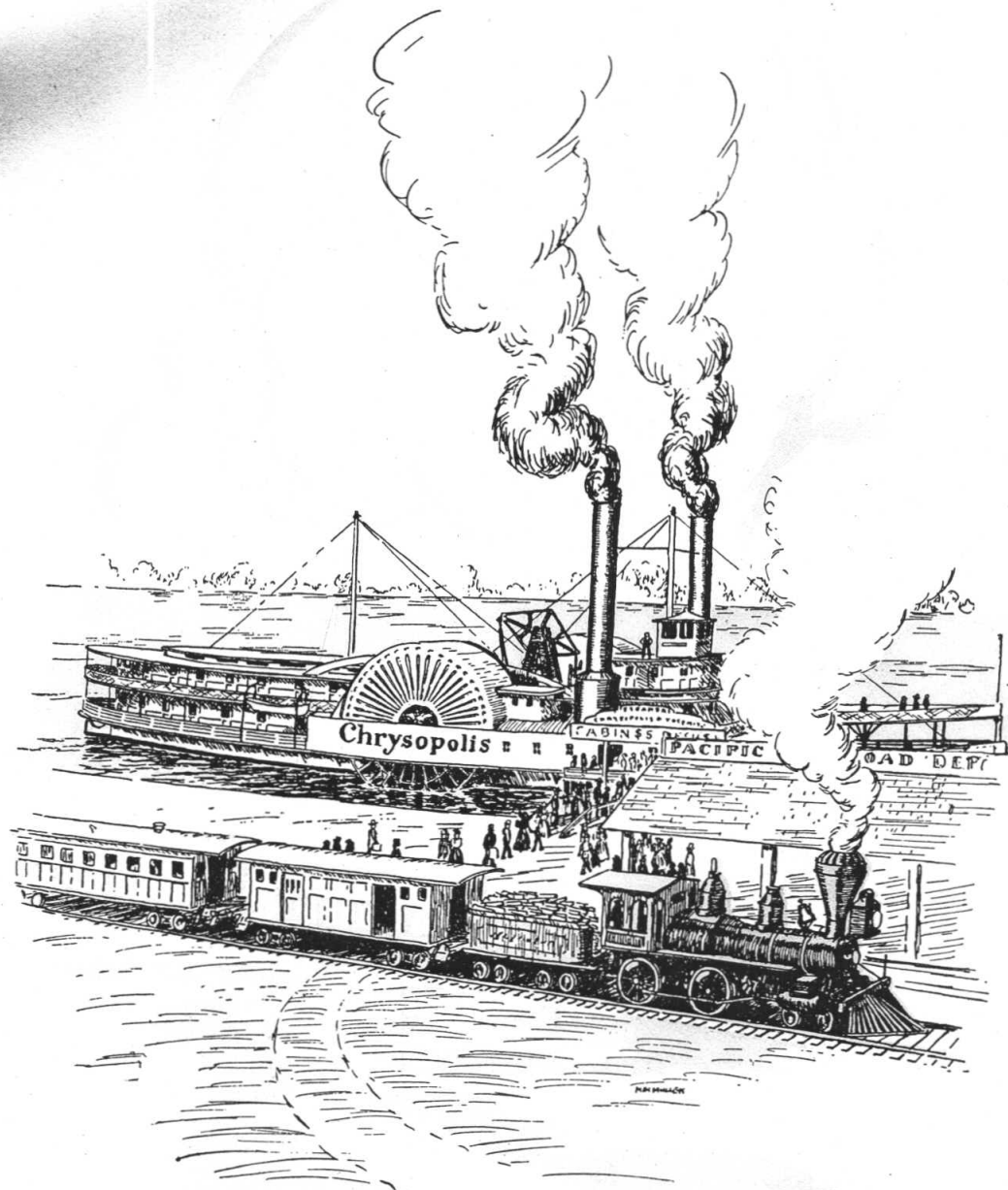
JERRY MacMULLEN

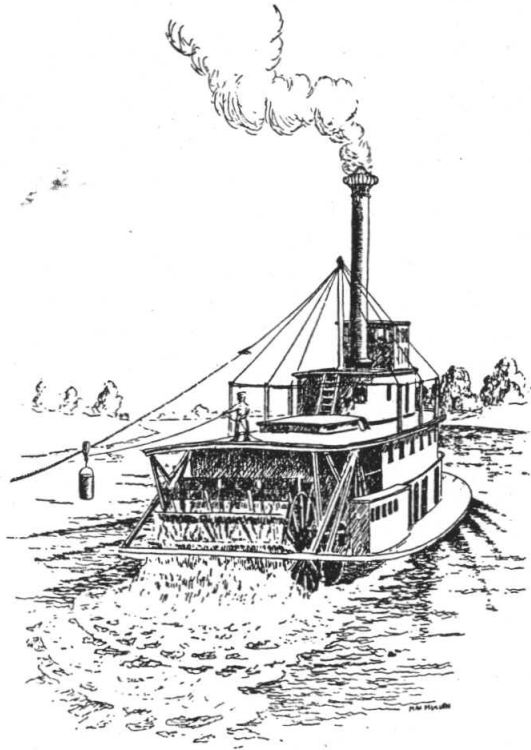
*Illustrated by the Author*



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## CHAPTER VIII

### TRICKS OF THE TRADE

WHEN Captain Enos Fouratt reached San Francisco in the schooner *Spray*, on January 2, 1850,<sup>1</sup> he had ideas about making a fortune by simply picking up the gold which he had been advised was lying around in chunks along the river banks. But Fate, the economics of river transportation, and a roving rattlesnake with a nasty disposition willed differently.

No sooner had he left the *Spray* than he was solicited to take the schooner *Chesapeake* up to Sacramento. The best information he could get on how to reach the up-river city was that it was "about two or three hundred miles away, in that direction," with a forefinger helpfully pointed in what might be termed a general

<sup>1</sup> She was actually off San Francisco bar on December 28, 1849, but adverse winds and currents robbed the captain, by a mere two days, of the distinction of being, like his brother John who had preceded him, a 'Forty-Niner.

northeasterly azimuth. This was a bit vague; the captain, however, realized that Sacramento was closer to the source of free gold than was San Francisco, and accepted the job. Forthwith he set about seeking more explicit sailing directions, and before long he met a chap whom he "had schoonered with on the Hudson," as he later described it. The friend had just returned from up the river, and for one reason or another he desired no part of Sacramento in the future; he did, however, pick up a pencil and sheet of paper and draw, from memory, a map of the winding waterway. With only this penciled sketch to guide him, the captain got under way with the *Chesapeake* on the morning of January 6, making the trip in about three days, and receiving, to his amazement, \$1,600 in gold for his trouble. About that time he learned the only other way to get gold was to dig for it—which in no way bore out the stories he had picked up in the East. He was therefore in a receptive mood when a man came along and offered him \$2,000 to take a brig down to San Francisco. The next morning there was a fine north wind, and on the strength of this he delivered the little two-masted square-rigger in Bay waters in a little more than a day's time. Another schooner was ready to go up, and for another \$1,600 he took her to Sacramento. He picked up a few similar jobs in the immediate future; then, one fine day, the *Chesapeake* was put up at auction and he bought her.

Characteristic of the era's scorn for small change was the captain's subsequent flyer in dimes. Just as the professional San Franciscan of today insists belligerently upon wearing out his pockets with the proceeds of a ten-dollar bill changed into silver half-dollars,<sup>2</sup> so the local *paisanos* of the 'fifties would have no truck with any coinage other than gold. Another river captain had bought, on speculation, \$2,000 worth of dimes—and found himself stuck with them. One evening there was a quiet little poker game, and as Captain Fouratt was as skilled in his handling of the traditional fifty-two bits of pasteboard as he was in matters of seaman-

<sup>2</sup> As good a way as any to get yourself tossed out of a Bay city taproom is to lay half a pound of your change out on the mahogany and say to the bartender that you'd really prefer to have American money.

ship, he became the possessor of the dimes. The loser was as well off as the winner, apparently; for those dimes did their new owner no more good than they did the other riverman. In fact, they lay around the *Chesapeake* in open kegs, and the playful deck hands used to pelt one another with handfuls of them. It was not unusual for them to sweep ten or twelve dollars' worth of dimes over the side when cleaning up in the morning. Finally the *Chesapeake* was sent up to Trinidad, during the Gold Bluff excitement, and was lost, dimes and all. At about that time the easy money appears to have played out and Captain Fouratt decided to have a try at mining. His career, however, was brief, ending when he stepped on a rattlesnake. The reptile, apparently quite willing to make an issue of the incident, turned around and sank its fangs into the doughty mariner. They patched him up, but the experience had chilled his desire for mining. And so he became pilot of his first river steamer, the side-wheeler *West Point*. That was in 1852.

In those early days, incidentally, the pilot did more actual work than the master, and got more pay; this was the case until about 1865. The Old Man's duties were largely administrative and social; it was he who entertained important passengers, lent his august presence to the dining saloon and social hall, and in general upheld the pride and dignity of the steamboat and her owners. Later, as master, it was not unusual for Captain Fouratt to entertain, at select and friendly little poker sessions in his cabin, groups of the elite which included such passengers as Stanford, O'Brien, and others who left their names in California history.

As has been hinted before, feeling ran high when the steamboats raced—not that this was unusual, considering the large amounts of money which frequently were wagered on the outcome of individual contests. It even got to the point of deliberate rammings if a rival proved too dangerous; there was, for instance, the night when the *Goliah* lay in wait in Suisun Bay for the avowed purpose of ramming and sinking the famous *New World*. But that steamer was as much too fast in battle as she had been in racing, and after a brief exchange of pistol shots between their officers and passengers the two vessels drew apart, the *New World* safely in the lead.

The famous race of the *Confidence* and the *Queen City*, while not featured by gunfire, nearly ended in flames so far as the latter vessel was concerned. The *Confidence*, of California Steam, burned Philadelphia coal, imported at some expense; the *Queen City*, which belonged to the Marysville outfit, depended upon the cheaper and more plentiful local supply of wood. So stern a pace did the *Confidence* set, for all the screams of her engineer about the speed with which his coal was disappearing, that the *Queen City* had to force her own fires until flame and glowing cinders poured in sheets from her stacks, the firebrands falling over her decks in a blazing shower.<sup>8</sup> Little fires broke out here and there, and it was necessary to organize her passengers into two work parties—one to pass wood to the furnace, the other to form a bucket-brigade and put out the resulting blazes on topside. But despite her efforts, the *Queen City* lost the race to her rival.

Around 1860, Peter Donohue built the *Sacramento*, primarily as a rival of the speedy *Antelope*; but as a racer she was a bit disappointing. One day the *Antelope*, which had left Sacramento half an hour behind her, caught up with the *Sacramento* at the entrance to the narrow channel of Steamboat Slough. The *Antelope* tried to pass, but the *Sacramento* "caught her suction" and forced her, crab-fashion, on to a mudbank, where she hung up. Captain Fouratt, who had her on that voyage, managed to get her off in a few minutes and started in hot pursuit; his passengers were very unhappy over the affair and began overhauling their six-shooters; but the captain assured them that he had an even better idea. Shortly after the two steamers had made their stop at Rio Vista he succeeded in jamming the *Antelope's* bow into the *Sacramento's* starboard quarter. The other pilot rang up full astern, hoping to slide off and rake the *Antelope's* side—and, if possible, carry away one of her wheels. But the *Antelope* was turning up for full ahead, and all that the *Sacramento* succeeded in doing was to swing her-

<sup>8</sup> Later, when the towing of wheat-laden barges became more common, it was the practice to fit spark-arresters to the smokestacks. The boatmen didn't particularly care about the fires which they started in near-by wheatfields, but starting a fire on one's own barge full of sacked grain was something else again.

self squarely across her rival's bow. In that position the *Antelope* pushed her sideways down the river for several miles before they decided to call it quits. The next day, in San Francisco, Captain Fouratt was arrested on a charge of malicious mischief—a legal adventure which, he reported later, caused him “some slight delay and expense” but nothing really serious.

Pilots of the “Independent Opposition” steamer *Nevada* apparently delighted in “winging” the little *Antelope* and sending her home with badly tattered railings and joiner-work; but when they tried it out on the *New World*, they caught a tartar.<sup>4</sup> In their most daring encounter the high-sided *Nevada*, after trying to force the *New World* ashore, found herself hung up on the other vessel's lower guardrails, the *Nevada*'s superior height proving for once a distinct liability. Gleefully the *New World* pushed her on to a mudbank, only the skill of the *Nevada*'s pilot keeping him from the ignominy of being hung up in the branches of a huge sycamore, especially picked out by the *New World* for the ceremony. In a later race, the *New World* having chased the *Nevada* into Steamboat Slough at full speed, the leading craft's pilot, apparently with too much on his mind at one time, failed to note the slight swirl which marked a snag. There was a roar of splintering timber and the *Nevada* began to fill. They got her on a bank near Cache Slough before she went down, and so no one was drowned; but the bank proved to be quicksand, and the big steamer became a total loss. Some people maintained that, as her pilot had formerly been employed by the wicked corporation which owned the *New World*, he had done the whole thing on purpose; but nothing ever came of it.

Residents of the bustling village of Benicia, it seems, took their river racing seriously, and their sympathies appear definitely to have been with the opposition steamers. One fine evening, as the *New World* rang off her engines and drifted up to the wharf, the local peasants refused to take her lines. Meanwhile the rival *Washoe* was making a beeline for the same wharf, across the bows

<sup>4</sup> For taking similar liberties with the schooner *Mary A. Evans* in Carquinez Straits, the *New World* lost a \$5,600 lawsuit on December 4, 1861.


of the *New World*. The latter's pilot—again the redoubtable Fouratt—gave her one bell and a jingle, and she gathered way, the two rapidly converging on what the best maritime circles recognize as a thing to be avoided—namely, the “collision course.” The bow of the *New World* cut into the side of the *Washoe* as if she had been a pile of lug boxes, and it took no small amount of skill to get her ashore before she sank—which is fortunate, for the water off Benicia is not exactly shallow. Caught in flying wreckage, one of the *Washoe's* passengers was killed, and the Benicians therefore had a virtuous angle to the rage which boiled over as a result of this treatment of the city's favorite steamboat; resentment was so high, in fact, that it was necessary to send soldiers down from Benicia Arsenal to protect the *New World* and her people from mob violence. The Solano County grand jury promptly indicted Captain Fouratt on a charge of assault with intent to commit murder, and he found it expedient to employ a mouthpiece—and a good one. The most important witness for the defense was to have been the *Washoe's* pilot, and two well-known detectives of the period were detailed to see that nothing happened to him; however, one fine night he contrived to tumble out of his own pilot-house window and break his neck. In some manner not made crystal-clear<sup>5</sup> the case was disposed of, with no harm to the pilot of the *New World*.


The next year a new grand jury was called, and to the surprise of Captain Fouratt it indicted him all over again. The defendant and his legal talent did a bit of sleuthing and developed the fact that Solano County's face-saving gesture was not, strictly speaking, kosher. To be blunt, the whole affair was more or less a cooked-up deal, and one of the grand jurors was naïve enough to admit, under proper persuasion, that even before being called he had publicly announced that “the *New World's* pilot oughter be hung!” With

<sup>5</sup> A quaint legend has been handed down to the captain's grandson, about this affair. It seems that the defendant assured the owners of his vessel that if he were advanced a modest sum in the neighborhood of \$600 he could work wonders with the grand jury. Among the wonders he worked, it is alleged, was the roaring state of intoxication which he was able to induce in (a) the individual members of the grand jury and (b) the magistrate before whom he was supposed to appear.



such obvious malice on the part of at least one of the good men and true, the case was tossed out, and the incident was considered closed. The *Washoe* was raised and rebuilt, later to become Page One news by blowing up.

It was not until along in the 'sixties that anything serious was done in the way of charting the rivers. J. A. Crocker, carpenter for the California Steam Navigation Company, sounded the Sacramento early in 1863; nciled maps and personal knowledge on the part of the pilots had been all that there was for conducting a vessel safely along the Sacramento or the San Joaquin. If you wanted to get a vessel up or down, you were careful to entrust her to a man who knew just when to line up his jackstaff with this barn or that cottonwood in order to keep in the channel. The first printed chart came from data obtained, at about the time of the Civil War, by the brig *Lawrence* of the United States Revenue Cutter Service. The first charts listed the various important trees and houses and barns—and even, if we are to believe river lore, those homely detached structures immortalized by the late Mr. Chick Sale, if they were so located as to be of value as leading marks.

An early government-sponsored improvement on the rivers was a dolphin installed at the north entrance to Steamboat Slough  especially for the benefit of the huge *Capital*. She was so long, and so deep, that she couldn't make the short bend, and so had to go several miles out of her way, around the main course of the river. When the dolphin was in place she would ease up to it and, with her bow once set firmly against the piles, put the rudder hard over and come ahead on the engines. The result, of course, was that she would neatly pivot around on her bow until she was fairly on the new course; then she would back down just enough to clear the dolphin, give the "ahead" bell, and go merrily on about her business.

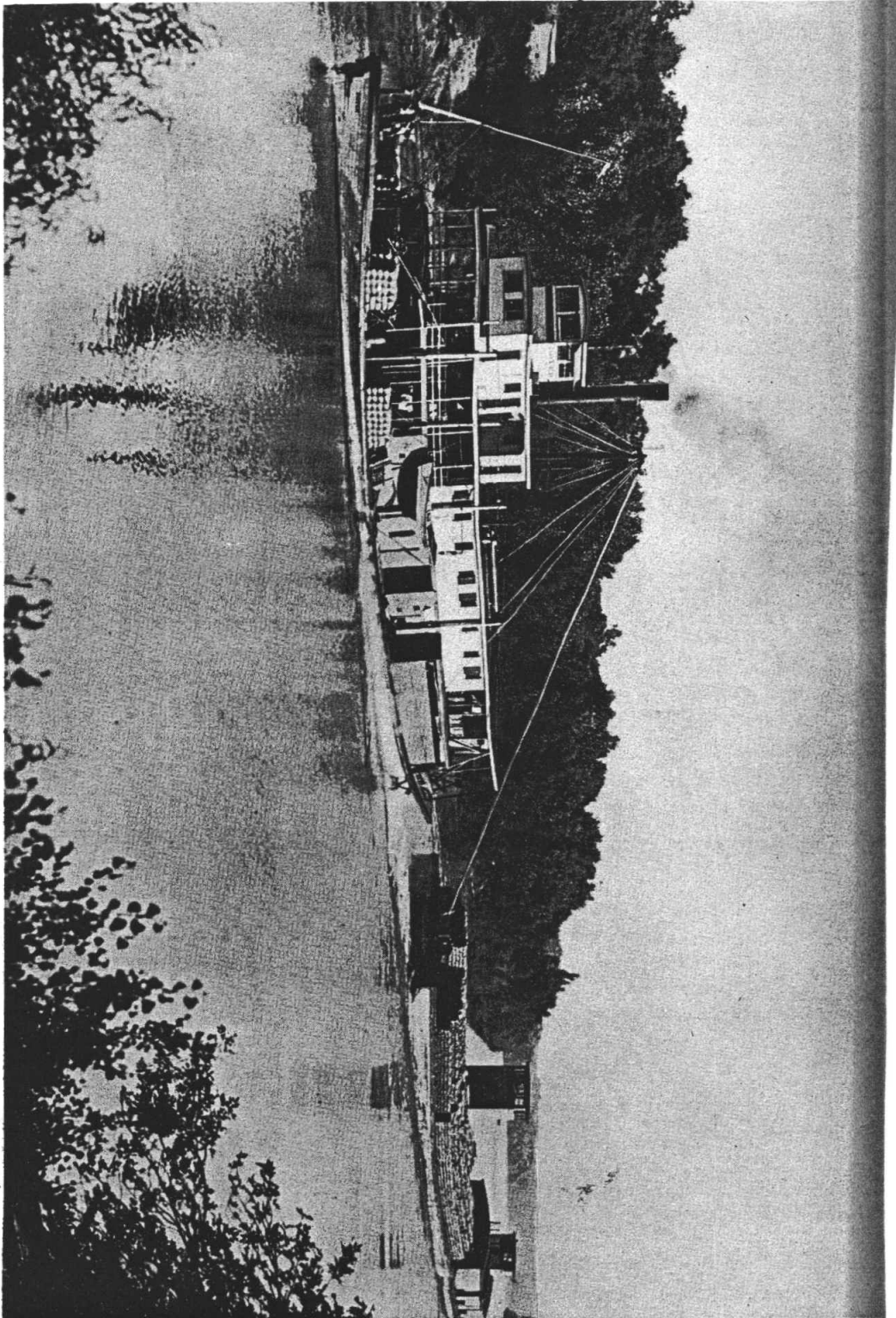
The value of the echo of one's whistle, in navigating close waters, is known to all pilots. But the Sacramento and the San Joaquin run through flat country, and to produce the required effect echo-boards were set up along the banks of the rivers. By

giving a short toot on the whistle, and then listening for the echo, the pilot even in the thickest tule<sup>6</sup> fog could get from the echo-board a very fair idea not only of his bearing but also of his distance from it. The modern echo-boards generally are erected in connection with navigation lights, and are placed at strategic bends in the rivers, to assist the fog-cursed pilot in his work.

It is in the Delta country, and along certain reaches of the Sacramento, that the tule fog reaches its highest stage of perfection. Since the beginning of time it has had nothing to do but devote itself to the task of becoming a good, rousing, thoroughgoing fog—and it certainly has learned to do a workmanlike job. Yet in spite of these fogs and of the driving rain-squalls of the winter months, accidents have been surprisingly few. River seamanship is an art in itself, and any of the salt-water brethren who are inclined to look down their noses at river pilots are invited to try it themselves sometime, preferably with a vessel of no great value. The river pilot must know all of the answers, and know them right now.

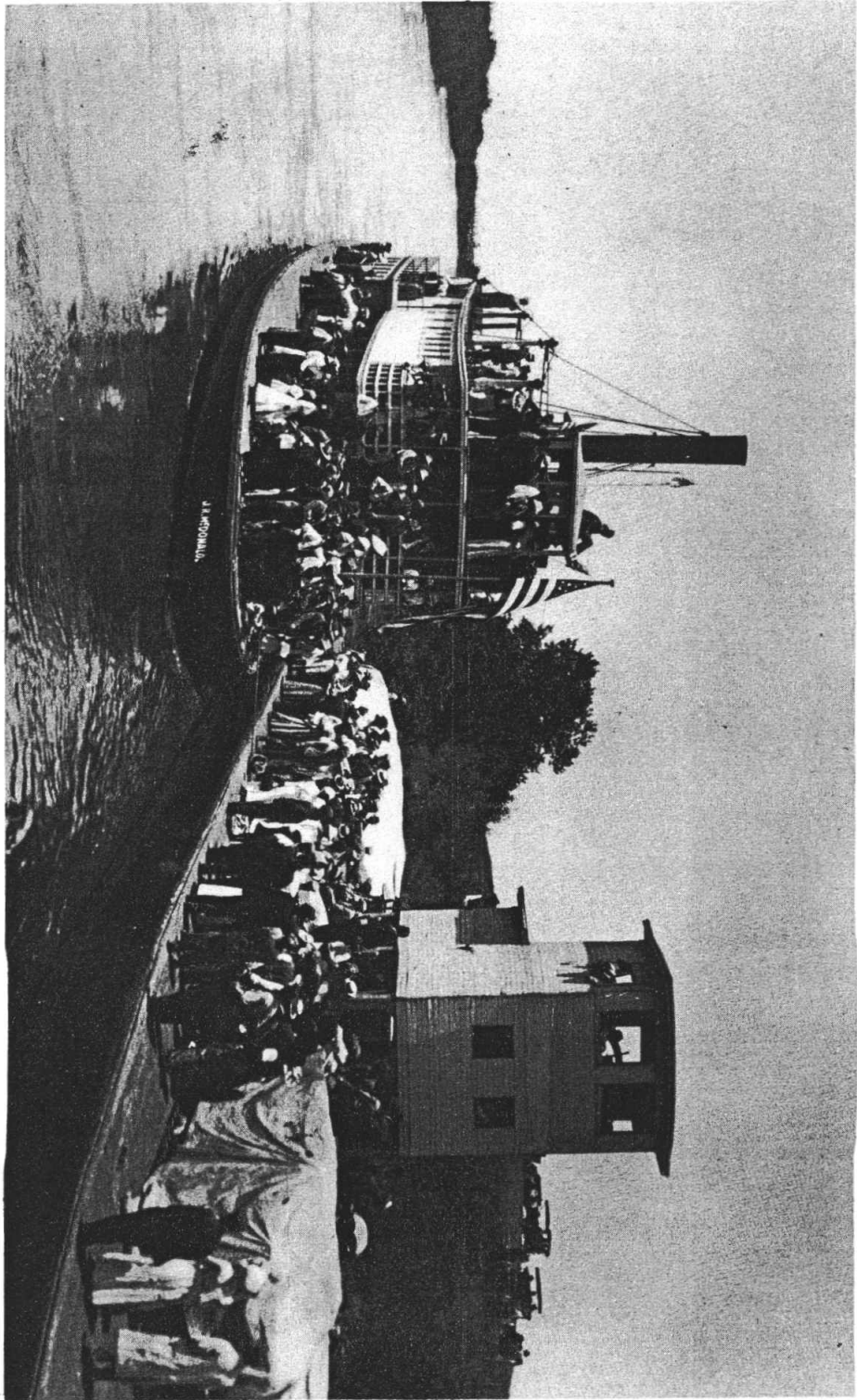
Some mention has been made of the need for a certain knowledge of legal procedure—as, for instance, in the case of Captain Fouratt's difficulties with the grand jury. Captain Wakeman, of the *New World*, was a good side-wheel barrister, too—he had to be. The question has been raised from time to time as to how he managed, after snatching the *New World* out from under the nose of the sheriff on the East coast, to get her into other ports, including San Francisco, with no papers. Apparently the same thought troubled Captain Wakeman. So, it seems, when they got to Montevideo he signaled a boat, and started for shore, to call on the American consul. As soon as the boat was clear, he calmly arose and stepped over the side; the oarsmen, a bit puzzled, hauled him aboard and continued on to the landing. A few minutes later, dripping wet, he stood before the consul; he had met with a most unfortunate accident—in some manner he had fallen out of the boat,

<sup>6</sup> A Grade-A tule fog is so thick and so wet that it actually will put rural telephone lines out of commission, by grounding out the wires carried on merely rain-proof insulators.



The *Dover*, towing a barge by a line from her hog-post

Morton Photo



Navigation on the San Joaquin, near Fresno, about 1905

Behrman Photo

and in doing so had lost all of the ship's papers. Would the consul be able to fix him up with a new set? The consul took it, hook, line, and sinker, and the worthy captain went back to his ship with all of the papers he needed.

The introduction of barges into the river trade presented a problem in seamanship which the rivermen were not long in overcoming. With a stern-wheeler, of course, you have no place to put towing-bitts. And even if you did secure them to the big beam abaft the wheel, you then would have them so far aft that your towing vessel would be unmanageable. Any towboat man will tell you what is meant by "getting in irons" with a tow—briefly, having the strain so far aft that the rudder is powerless to swing the stern against the weight. The British recognize this fully, which is why British tugs have the towing-bitts practically amidships. The better American tugs, both commercial and government, also have the bitts or towing-engine as far ahead of the rudder as practicable. But you can't do it in a stern-wheeler—the wheel is in the way; and that is that. Those barges, however, were there to be towed. What to do? Some imaginative riverman looked aloft and found the answer—the main hog-post. And so to the system of hog-framing which enables a river steamer to keep her lines and not sag at the bow or stern was added the job of taking the tow.

Steamers which might expect to do towing jobs were therefore fitted with a special bit of blacksmithing atop the center hog-post. It was swiveled to swing from side to side, and from it hung a wire pennant with a heavy wooden toggle spliced into its outer end. There was an eye-splice in the barge's towline, through which the toggle was slipped. Thus hooked up, steamer and tow would get under way; when they wanted to let go, the steamer slowed down until the barge slackened up her line, the toggle was then slipped out, and the barge drifted in to its landing. Incidentally, the *San Joaquin No. 4*, touted at the time of her building as "the most powerful inland vessel in America," towed as many as five barges, tandem, at one time.

The towline from overhead, incidentally, served another highly useful purpose. Obviously, with a galley and a cook aboard the

steamer, it would be wasteful to set up similar arrangements in each barge, and yet barge crews get just as hungry as those aboard steamers. Hauling in the barges would be difficult, and thus another river gadget came into use—the towline dumb-waiter, operated like a breeches buoy, for passing food to the men who handled the huge steering-wheel and triple rudder of the barge.

As each meal was prepared aboard the steamer, it was placed, a dishful at a time, in a deep iron bucket. Then the bucket was secured to a snatch block on the towline, and the cook, standing on the texas deck just over the wheel, would solemnly pay out on a hand line fastened to the bucket. As a result, the barge crew's meal would safely pass aft along the towline, to be taken aboard by its ultimate consumers; and, after the meal, the same hand line would haul back the bucket and its load of empty dishes.

While on the subject of stern-wheel logistics, it is well to mention briefly a legend concerning the *Gold*—the original *Gold*, built in 1883 and not "The New *Gold*," which entered this vale of tears in 1889 as the scow *Fort Bragg* (named for the little coastal lumber town where she was built). The *Gold*, it is alleged, had a stern wheel which was innocent of any guard over its top. As a result—so the story goes—in among the myriad islands and sloughs of the Delta country she used to shuck catfish up on her texas deck, where they were picked up by the cook, skinned, and prepared as only that particular cook could prepare catfish. It should be made clear, however, that this story is not documented; it is merely a riverman's yarn which you are at liberty to accept or discard.