

Journey on the Uncle Toby

A Story of the Smith Family's trip to Fulton

As sounds of the most recent mobs carried down the hills of Nauvoo to the Mansion House, Emma bustled around, packing and organizing her house. Julia and young Joseph tried to help, while Frederick and Alexander played with baby David, trying to calm him down from the frightening sounds outside.

It had been a difficult two years for Emma's family. Her husband, Joseph Smith Jr., had been killed, leaving her a widow with four young children and new baby expected in five months. Many of Emma's friends, including her brother Jesse, had tried to get Emma to leave the family home in Nauvoo, and move somewhere safer. Emma refused, but as times grew more and more difficult, she realized it would be best for her family to leave their beloved home for a safer place.

The morning of September 12, 1846, Emma and her children joined several of their friends and made their way to the banks of the Mississippi River. There they saw a boat, the Uncle Toby, bobbing gently in the current. Captain Grimes ignored the mobs yelling angrily from the shore and docked in Nauvoo to collect his passengers. Traveling with the Smith family were Jane and Nancy Carter, William Clapp, the Knight and Walker families, and Emma's household helper, Servilla. Jared Knight, Loren Walker, and Wesley Knight traveled by land with carriages, horses, and household goods, planning to meet their families in Fulton.

As the paddle boat slowly pulled away from shore, the passengers could hear the sounds of fighting fade into the distance. Emma settled in for a restful journey. She had had little time to herself since her marriage almost twenty years ago. She passed the six day journey resting quietly, talking with her friends, and laughing along with the others as William Clapp tried in vain to get Nancy Carter to agree to marry him.

The Smith children enjoyed the trip as well. Growing up on the Mississippi River, they had watched the steamers chug up and down river, carrying passengers and cargo, but they seldom had the chance to ride the boats themselves.

As a young lady, 15 year old Julia enjoyed the opportunity to socialize with others her age in a new and sophisticated manner. Mr. Clapp's constant attention to Nancy caused Julia to dream of a time not too far off when she would be allowed to be courted by young men. When she wasn't with the other young ladies, Julia took baby David out for walks along the deck. David and Julia had a strong loving bond, as Julia had helped her mother raise him. Julia was like a little mother to David. David loved to be held by the rail of the boat to watch for birds. Julia would laugh along with the little boy when he became excited over the many birds.

Like many boys who grew up on the banks of the Mississippi, Joseph, 13, Frederick, 10, and Alexander 8, were fascinated with river life. They spent as much time as Captain Grimes would allow up in the pilot house. Captain Grimes had a son just a year younger than Joseph, so

he knew exactly what the boys would be most interested in. The boys loved to watch the man steer the boat by turning the enormous wheel. The Captain taught them how to look out for hidden river dangers like strong currents and how to read the color of the river to figure out how deep the water was. The boys also picked up on some of the river boat language like sawyers-large fallen trees caught in the river, port and starboard for the left and right sides of the boat, and bow and stern for the front and back ends of the boat.

When Joseph, Fredrick, and Alexander were not in the pilot house, they joined Julia and David on the deck. The children watched the shore for animals like deer, beavers, turtles and a few birds including ducks, geese, and bald eagles. Occasionally, they even saw Indians.

All too soon, their journey from Nauvoo to Fulton was over. As the Uncle Toby pulled up to the dock on Cherry Street, Emma and the children gathered their belongings and prepared for their new life. Emma sighed. The past few days had allowed her to rest, and now it was time to resettle her family once more in a new home. This time however, she would be able to focus only on her children. In this new home, she could rest from the constant struggle of helping lead a religious movement, care for the sick and injured, and cooking and cleaning for the steady stream of visitors she had in Nauvoo. It was time to look to the future.

Life on the Mississippi

The Mississippi River is the longest river in North America, stretching 3,860 miles from Itasca Lake in Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana. The River touches ten states and has six major rivers which empty into it.

River boat captains, like Captain Grimes, were some of the strongest and smartest men on the frontier. They navigated the river in a time before modern equipment like sonar, global positioning systems, and sometimes even maps. While they were being trained, a time they were called “Cub Pilots,” part of their training included memorizing routes on the river. They quickly learned that the color of the water helped determine how deep the river would be, and if it was deep enough for their boat.

River Boats like the Uncle Toby were called “side packet steamers.” Side packet referred to the paddle wheel of the boat. The large paddle wheels were located on the sides of the boat and they were enclosed except for the part that went into the water. Steamer refers to how the boat moved through the water. Large broilers were located on the deck of the boat, and the burning wood or coal would build up steam. The steam is what moved the paddle wheels so the boat could move. Steam power was strong enough that these paddle boats could go down and upstream. Steamers typically were made of wood and were between 80 to 140 feet long. The Uncle Toby was considered a small boat: it was about 109 tons and about 90 feet long. It was launched from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1844. During this time in river boat history, most boats had a five year average life span. Very few boats were retired because of old age. Typically, the boilers would explode, causing the steamers to sink.

Exploding boilers were not the only danger. If captains did not pay close enough attention, the boat could get stuck on a sand bar, or on the shore. If they were going too fast while trying to dock, they could destroy the dock and harm the boat. Fallen trees, called sawyers, caused problems as well. If the captain did not see one, it could impale the boat causing it to sink. One spot along the upper Mississippi caused many problems: the Des Moines Rapid. This was a treacherous stretch of the river between Nauvoo and Keokuk in Illinois. Luckily, by the time Emma and her family made their trip to Fulton, the hazard was fixed. In 1837 the United States Army Corps of Engineers led by Robert E. Lee blasted a channel through the rapids.

Captain William Leander Grimes was the Pilot of the Uncle Toby when Emma made her trip. His son, Absolom Grimes, was born in 1834 and often accompanied his father. Absolom was a Cub Pilot under his father and earned his license in 1852. Absolom Grimes became a well known Confederate mail runner during the Civil War, and met another Mississippi River legend, Samuel Clemens who received his river boat license in 1859. Samuel Clemens became an author, choosing the pen name Mark Twain, which in steamer language means “two fathoms,” safe water depth for the Steamers.