

Steaming Down the Grand

by Charles E. Belknap, *The Yesterdays of Grand Rapids*, pp. 56-58.

An account by Charles Belknap about a day spent aboard a Grand River steamer as it traveled downstream to Grand Haven in 1857.

One Spring morning in 1857, drifting away from the pier at the yellow warehouse, the steamer Olive Branch set forth to the Haven with a cargo of package freight, a top deck loaded with passengers, and Capt. Robert Collins, Pilot Tom Robbins and Cook Jim Dailey, with a full crew of husky Irishmen. We were soon winding between banks heavily wooded and bordered with wild fruit trees in full bloom--plum, cherry, crab and thornapple--festooned with wild grape vines.

At the dock of Hovey's Plaster Mills a hundred barrels of land plaster were taken aboard. Then angling across the river we were against the bank at Grandville....Here we left package freight and took aboard a few passengers.

At Haire's Landing we gathered up a lot of maple sugar in tubs and a pile of slabwood for the boilers.

At the mouth of Sand Creek, where there had once been an Indian village, we added a couple going to the Haven to be married. Coming down from the upper road they crossed the creek on a tree footbridge and the young lady had taken a tumble and had to swim out.

They built a fire to dry out as well as to signal the boat. Once aboard the women passengers fitted the young woman out in dry clothing and the couple were seated at the captain's table for the noon meal. The bride-to-be was game all right. She had come west to teach the Sand Creek school, but the first month she found a better job and the log shack's pupils had a vacation.

At the Blendon hills two families of Hollanders all wearing wooden shoes, were met by a man with a yoke of cattle. Their goods were piled high on his cart and the boat tooted a goodbye as they trailed away into the forest.

At Eastmanville Mr. Eastman came aboard with a party of ladies and gentlemen. The ladies were carrying many things made by the Indian women of the vicinity, beaded belts and beaded money bags; some had traveling bags of smoke-tanned buckskin ornamented with native dyes and woven designs of porcupine quills. The freight taken here consisted of many packs of ax helms (handles) shaved out of white hickory.

The long dining table was crowded at the evening meal. Capt. Collins toasted the bride-to-be who was garbed in the best that several "carpet sacks" afforded.

At the landing at Bass river Mr. Eastman took charge of the dining cabin and with song and story the Olive Branch rounded Battle point, paddling past great river bottom meadows of cattail and wild rice, from which flocks of wild duck came swirling overhead.

There were many inviting channels and waterways and the pilot needed to be well informed. As we neared the Haven the sun in the golden west disclosed smoking mill stacks, forests of ship masts and drifting sand dunes. Beyond was a great sea of white caps. This was the end of a "perfect day."