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By Fred Landon.

Bored with the monotony of their military duties, two young officers of the British garrison at Niagara journeyed by the lakes from Buffalo to Chicago in the early autumn of 1839 and after a fortnight of shooting on the Illinois prairies returned by the same route. Their experiences were narrated in the *United Service Journal and Naval and Military Magazine* in the issues of March and April, 1840. The writer, using the pen-name "Bugle," does not tell us by what steamer they journeyed westward, merely describing it as "old-fashioned—the worst of disabilities in America—dirty, dark, a very slow *coche d'eau*, but withal a good sea boat."

"So little versed was I in American steamboats," he adds, "as not to discover that she was high-pressure until her engine began to utter that harsh coughing noise which, next to the chance of blowing up, is the most unpleasant peculiarity of that description of craft." Three years later Charles Dickens was to record a similar experience when he took passage eastbound from Sandusky in the steamer *Constellation*.[1] Her high-pressure engine gave him the feeling, he said, that he was lodging on the first floor of a powder mill. Our military friends were fortunate in being able to return aboard the new steamer *Illinois* which they found to be "a splendid, well-formed and extremely fast boat."[2]

On the journey westward, "Bugle" found himself with forty or fifty fellow-travellers. Though inclined to be patronizing in his comments he was not unkind and, indeed, found much of interest and much to admire in the mixed group with which he was thrown. He says:

> In a steamboat bound for the rough regions of the Western desert I did not look for a congregation of *petits maitres* in manner, or Sybarites in habit; nor was I much disappointed in my expectations—for, of the whole number of passengers, there were not more than two or three who, measured by the European standard, could be classed as gentlemen. Though disposed to make allowance for the rawness of western American society, and for the moderate quantum of polish one has a right to expect in the public conveyances of any country, I must admit that it required all my self-restraint to veil the disgust that I felt at the noisome

habits of the greater part of the company to which I was for the time hopelessly nailed.

In counterpoise to the above-vented complaint, I was much struck by the good nature, orderly conduct, and respect towards each other shown by so numerous a company of males, confined within so small a space for so long and tedious a period; and I could not help feeling that, with a like number of English or Irish passengers of the same grade, thrown together by accident, some disputes or disturbances would have very probably occurred. The American appears to be the most patient of all creatures travelling by sea or by land.

The saloon was the favorite resort of the passengers.

Spirits, porter even champagne was to be had at its bar—cabin passengers applying at the counter facing the saloon, and deck passengers at a small window opening towards the deck. The former were in general very moderate in their spirituous wants; but of the latter I cannot say so much. Among many minor bibbers, I noted one hickory-faced old fellow, who paid for nineteen "drinks" in one day. . . . Although among a business people, the chief conversation naturally enough hinged upon trade, dollars and individual bargaining, and I had to listen to many a boast of over-reaching skill, yet there were some amongst the party whose humorous banterings and amusing descriptions of personal exploits, couched in the unique lingo which is now so well known in England, completely withdrew my attention from my book, and caused an uncontrollable fit of laughter, which, if noticed at all, was probably put down to the credit of my author.

Early each morning the saloon was a scene of shaving on a grand scale.

An easy arm-chair, with a rest made expressly to receive the patient's head at a convenient angle of incidence, stood ready, and a negro porter was generally in attendance to give his customers a touch of his black art; but if the legitimate tonsor happened to be absent, mutual abrasion became the order of the day; and, in such case, some rather funny scenes occurred, and jokes as rough as their chin were good-humoredly bandied by the actors. "I guess I've got a considerable strong crop for you, this morning,"

> remarked the third mate of our vessel to a deck passenger who was about to lather him. "Yes, by Ch—t! and a full acre of it, too," rejoined the other, sustaining the agricultural metaphor, and dabbing away manfully at the massive jaw before him. "I reckon I'll have to scald you like a hog before them bristles will come away." The matutinal salutations, too, were occasionally very characteristic. "Well, sir, how do you come on this morning?" "First rate." "That's prime, I like to see you clever." Or, after breakfast, "How do you get along, mister, by this time?" "Pretty stiff, thank ye; I feel kind o' middlin' independent since I fed my face."

"Bugle" would scarcely have lived up to the tradition of British visitors in America if he had not made comment upon the eating habits of his companions aboard ship. This is what he has to say:

> The despatch of meals, for which the Americans by their own admission are so notorious, is, on board these steamboats, most annoying. This haste is very excusable and intelligible at a city public table where the diner probably hurries back to his office to add another dollar to his heap; but on a long and tedious voyage time hangs heavy, and dinner might, without subjecting the traveller to a charge of gluttony, assist him in killing an hour or two very agreeably. By Jove, sir, in a quarter of an hour, one hundred bodies, without fear of fish-bones or suffocation, have "greatly daring, dined." I timed one of my fellow cormorants, and in eight minutes, by Shrewsbury or any other clock, beef, fish, ham, apple-sarce (so pronounced always, and always served up, except with roasted goose or pork), potatoes, cheese, punkin pie (pumpkin), and their diligent absorber, had severally and collectively vanished.
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> "You are rather late," said I to a gentleman in gray homespun, who took his seat beside me about ten minutes after the signal for dinner had been given. "Yes," replied he, "I should never a know'd it if I hadn't seen a chap come on deck picking his teeth". . . . The main argument for all this hurry seems to arise from the rapid succession of meals in the grand cabin, which is the refectory of the ship. No sooner is the cabin passengers' dinner ended than another table is spread for any one who can afford a quarter dollar; after which a third is laid for the hungry stewards

> and waiters, the situation of whose appetites during the progress of the two preceding feasts may be imagined, but cannot be described.

Forty-eight hours on Lake Erie, with stops at Dunkirk, Erie, Huron and "the rising town of Cleveland," brought the travellers to Detroit, "a handsome town, on rising ground, its wharves crowded with steamers, and contrasting disagreeably, to English senses at least, with the comparatively poor and deserted shore of Canada—only half a mile distant." The voyage northward from Detroit was uneventful until Lake Huron was reached when a storm of wind and hail, with heavy seas, forced the steamer back forty miles to seek shelter in the St. Clair River. There it lay at a fuel dock for seven hours, the roar in the neighboring forests making all aware that the storm still raged on the lake.

On Lake Huron the flat and wooded Michigan shores seemed unrelieved by a single building until at length the steamer put in at the little fuel depot of Presqu' Isle, "a collection of two or three huts, containing a few woodcutters and fishermen." On the night of September 28th the ship threaded the Straits of Mackinac and next morning was between the Beaver Islands and the western shore of Lake Michigan.

> The following day being Sunday, we had no sooner cleared out of a picturesque little bay of the Manitou Isle (Isle of the Great Spirit) with a fresh supply of firewood than prayers were announced in the cabin. All the passengers, fore and aft, were congregated, and a respectable but roughly-clad old man, with a week's gray beard on his face, volunteered to officiate. He was a deck passenger, and a Baptist preacher, as I understood. After offering up several excellent prayers, he discoursed sensibly enough on the consolations of religion; not, however, without the usual accompaniment of extempore preaching, repetition and tautology. Some of the worthy pastor's expressions, too, such as death-bed repentance being "not worth a cent" and his concluding sentence, "which is the devout wish of your humble and obedient servant. Amen!," sounded rather too familiar for the dignity of the pulpit.
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> On the other hand, the old man possessed a pleasing voice, and was fluent in his delivery and earnest in his calling. I believe every soul in the vessel except the officer of the watch and the man at the wheel was present, and all were most attentive. At one period

> of the service the minister read the first verse of a hymn, and, adding the usual exhortation "Let us sing," looked round, as if for assistance. After a long and rather awkward pause, an old gentleman in a distant corner cleared his voice and struck up a well-known air, a clear female pipe joined him from an opposite part of the cabin, the choir gradually swelled, and in the end the song of praise was very respectably performed. After prayers I went on deck, and, for the first time on fresh water, found myself fairly out of sight of land on all sides. The wind blew fresh, the weather was bright and cloudless, and the water, as I looked from the taffrail, was as blue as ocean. It was almost impossible to believe that we were not indeed ploughing the salt-sea wave.
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> The morning of the 30th September found us running along the eastern shore of Illinois—yet another province of the great continent laid open to our view. And at ten o'clock we anchored in Milwaukee Bay—a pretty-looking but unsafe harbour. The infant town is well situated on an elevated crescent of land above a small river; and, like most infants, looks particularly well at a distance. . . . Before we retired to our berths this last night of our voyage, a certificate of satisfaction with our captain was got up, and signed by the passengers; and upon adding the words "British Army" to my name, I observed an obvious increase of courtesy in the manners of many of my fellow-travellers.

October 1st brought the travellers to their destination. On awakening they found the steamer tied to the wharf—the voyage of more than 1000 miles achieved "in seven days minus as many hours." The narrow accommodations of the little vessel were exchanged for those of the Lake House, "an immense establishment kept in excellent style by an Englishman named Shelly." That afternoon the two officers, accompanied by an officer of the 34th Regiment whom they met after landing, started by wagon for Elk Grove, twenty-two miles west of Chicago. After a few days of rather poor sport they went on to Charleston on the Fox River where results were better. Returning to Chicago a week later, they boarded the *Illinois* and in a passage of sixty-seven hours arrived at Detroit on the evening of October 15th.

The Captain of the *Illinois* drew the admiration of his English passengers. He was, says the narrative, "precisely the character fitted to the crowds of wild customers who frequented his decks. Huge in person, and rough and resolute in manner, though attentive in all essentials to his passengers, there was something characteristic in the significant simplicity

of the single word ‘Blake’ in gold letters over his cabin door, instead of the invariable ‘Captain’s Cabin.’ ”[3]

Leaving the *Illinois* at Detroit, “Bugle” accompanied his friend of the 34th Regiment, whom he had met at Chicago, to Amherstburg, where his regiment was then stationed. There the annual races were being held on an excellent course which had been laid out by the officers of the regiment on the glacis of old Fort Malden. British, French, American and Indian visitors were present in great numbers. The Indians stood somewhat aloof from the crowd and did not seem to be greatly interested in the equestrian sports, but the French and Americans joined heartily in the amusements.

The most novel sport in the English visitor’s opinion was a trotting match on horseback, “a la Yankee—three horses and heats of three miles—merciless work, ridiculous and ungraceful as a spectacle, and destructive of all the romance, if there be any, of horsemanship.”

Amherstburg provided excellent shooting and the narrative tells of one day’s sport which amounted to fourteen braces and a half of quail, a couple of ducks, a woodcock and a wild turkey. But all good things must come to an end, though not until the night of October 24th did our traveller start on the last leg of his journey. Leaving the hospitable board of the Amherstburg garrison he was rowed in the dark, by the garrison crew, alongside the Buffalo steamer, up whose lofty sides he was hauled hand over hand by the passengers as the vessel backed her paddles, though still going six or eight knots an hour in the river current.

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[1] Sunday, April 24, 1842. W. G. Wilkins, *Charles Dickens in America*, p. 306. London, Chapman & Hall, 1911.

[2] The *Illinois*, built by Oliver Newberry at Detroit, was launched late in the summer of 1838 and was first placed on the Buffalo-Detroit run, but at the opening of navigation in 1839 this was extended to Chicago with an advertised sailing schedule calling for round trips every fifteen days. The *Illinois* was 205 feet long with a tonnage of 756.

[3] “The master of the *Illinois*, Captain Chesley Blake, was a salt-water sailor who had been employed by Newberry as a ship captain. He was a man of gigantic stature, with a

foghorn voice, a disposition far from meek and a wealth of profanity rivaling the vocabulary of the army in Flanders. He had numerous clashes with his employer from which he emerged more than once triumphant, repelling the Admiral's outbursts of invective with even louder shouts. When, as happened occasionally, Newberry was a passenger on his ship the doughty captain tolerated no interference by his employer. On one such voyage on the *Illinois*, homeward bound from Chicago to Detroit, Newberry was in a fussy mood and several times criticized the captain's management of the ship. At Mackinac Newberry was ashore and Captain Blake improved the opportunity to depart for Detroit, leaving the angry owner behind on the beach." See Quaife, M. M., *Lake Michigan*, pp. 152-53.

See also INLAND SEAS, Vol. IV, No. 3, page 166, Gilchrist, Marie, *Captain Chesley Blake* (a ballad).

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Buffalo to Chicago in 1839* by Fred Landon]