

TO THE DEAR ONES
AT HOMEElizabeth Fisk's Missouri
River Trip, 1867

In stateroom #2 on the steamboat *Little Rock*, Elizabeth and Robert Fisk sailed up the Missouri River in 1867, bound for the Montana gold fields. From her cabin—"a mite of a place"—the new bride wrote regular letters to her family, letters filled with excitement, danger, frustration, and observation—frontier life on a riverboat from a New England woman's perspective.

Elizabeth Chester and Robert Fisk married on March 21, 1867, in Vernon, Connecticut. Their prolonged courtship began in 1864 when the Yankee school ma'am and the Union captain began a wartime correspondence. After his discharge in 1865, Fisk journeyed to Connecticut, met Lizzie (as she preferred to be called), and the two became engaged. The wedding waited while Robert travelled to Montana with an 1866 overland expedition¹ and established the staunchly Republican *Helena Herald*. During the spring of 1867, Robert went east to solicit advertising, purchase presses and newsprint for the coming year, and to marry.

After the wedding, the couple visited New York City. By day Robert finished his business arrangements, in the evenings the newlyweds enjoyed theatre, concerts and other amusements. April 13, they left the city for a long and circuitous trip to Montana, stopping en route to visit Fisk family in upstate New York and to sell advertising space for the *Herald* to Chicago and St. Louis merchants.

At Omaha, Robert tried to obtain passage on a Missouri River steamboat for Fort Benton. After several delays and disappointments, he had his 116 bundles of newsprint and his Gordon presses loaded on the *Little Rock* and secured a cabin



Elizabeth Chester Fisk in traveling costume, 1867, probably just before leaving for Montana Territory.

for Lizzie and himself.² On May 16, 1867, the steamer left port; at the helm, Captain John S. Doyle guided the vessel up the muddy river on a voyage which covered 2,000 miles and took seventy-three days. On board were thirty-nine adults—twenty-eight men and eleven women—and between ten and twelve children. In addition to the Captain, the crew consisted of eight to ten men. In the ship's hold and lashed to its deck were 125 tons of cargo including Fisk's supplies.³

Lizzie documented the trip in frequent letters to her mother and sister Fannie back in Vernon, Connecticut.⁴ As the ship stopped at various ports or passed downward-bound boats, she

Edited by Rex C. Myers



Elizabeth Chester in the early 1860s.



Robert Emmett Fisk in the mid-1860s.

dispatched letters to her increasingly distant family. From Lizzie's pen emerged a picture of life aboard a Missouri River steamboat.

Dangers of Missouri River travel were many, including the possibility of Indian attack. Lizzie worried, but in truth the only Native Americans she saw evoked her pity more than fear. During frequent stops to "wood"—gather fuel—at fur or trade forts along the river, Lizzie went ashore to study flora, fauna, and inhabitants of the wild northern plains country. Each she recorded in faithful detail for her family.

The bulk of Lizzie's observations, however, focus on life aboard the *Little Rock* itself. Her strong Presbyterian upbringing, and firm moral principles, played against the frontier life she experienced. In the confidentiality of her correspondence she did not hesitate to express her disapproval and indignation. In time, frustration also emerged—various accidents aboard the riverboat delayed the trip and made it miserable beyond its calendar limits. All this Lizzie

recorded as an acute observer of life aboard a Missouri River steamboat.

Steamer Little Rock
May 17th, 1867

To the dear Ones at Home;

It was my purpose to write you each morning an account of the events of the preceeding day, accordingly I seated myself with pen, ink, and paper soon after breakfast and attempted to write; but the boat was moving rapidly and roughly through the water, and the jouncing was so violent that my fingers refused to shape intelligible letters. I have waited now till we are "tied up" for the night and once again I essay the task.

We left Omaha early yesterday morning, and after taking on Robert's freight, came slowly up the river. Our life may seem very uneventful but we manage to get a good deal of interest and enjoyment out of it. . . .

In the first stateroom on the right, entering at the rear of the cabin is Capt. Doyle with his wife and daughter. The Captain is a fine gentlemanly man who maintains most excellent discipline on his boat; allows no drinking, or profanity among his men, and last, but a very important item, understands navigating this most miserable of all rivers. Mrs. Doyle is a lively little lady, very kind and pleasant. Their daughter is about twelve years of age, the leader in all the sports of the children.

In the stateroom No. Two are Capt. and Mrs. Fisk. I would never have believed that one could be made comfortable in such a mite of a place. We have two berths, a wide one below, and narrower above. Under our bed are two traveling bags, boxes, boots, shoes, washbowl and pitchers. Outside our *couch* there remains a space six feet long and about three in width. There are two doors, one opening upon the outer deck, the other in the cabin. When we are both in our room, and the doors closed it would seem impossible to get out. But it is fully demonstrated that the thing can be done; Indeed I think our quarters grow more spacious every day, perhaps because one becomes accustomed to them. We have driven some nails, and by using the upper berth for a shelf, find room to store away many things. We have tarried long enough in this stateroom. Next is that of Mrs. A. S. Hall of Ft. Wayne, Ind. who is going with three children to join her husband at Virginia City. . . .

Adjoining her room is the pantry, and beyond the gentlemen's quarters. I have not yet made their acquaintance.

1. Between 1862 and 1866, Robert's older brother, James Liberty Fisk, led four overland expeditions from Minnesota to the Idaho-Montana gold fields. The best account of these trips is found in Helen McCann White's *Ho! For the Gold Fields*, Minnesota Historical Society, 1966.

2. Little information is available on the steamboat *Little Rock*. In all probability it was a 125-ton side-wheeler, built in New Albany, Indiana, in 1865. The vessel left St. Louis May 2, 1867, and docked in Omaha where the Fisks boarded. It reached Ft. Benton on July 14, and left three days later for the return trip. There is no other record of it operating on the upper Missouri between 1867 and the time it was lost in 1872.



Fannie Chester, Elizabeth's sister, circa 1867.

On the opposite side of the cabin are Mr. and Mrs. [C. A.] Prouty, who are going out to Virginia City to locate on a ranch. They are eastern people with whom I am only slightly acquainted. Then come Mrs. [Jerome] Norris and her son, a little boy of seven years, from Boston, Mass. Their destination is Virginia City. Occupying the same room is Mrs. Smith, just think of it! Mrs. Smith, and I believe her husband's name is John [Jacob]. She expects him down the river on one of the first return boats from Fort Benton.

Then comes a woman from Alabama [Mrs. Mary A. Starley], a poor white of the South, I fancy, with two little boys—badly behaved children as one need to see. An elderly lady [Mrs. D. Hatcher] is on the top shelf here whose home is in Montana, but who has been east to consult physicians, being affected with goitre. Her neck is not only painful, but it impedes her breathing. These comprise all the ladies with the exception of the wife of one of the pilots who has three children.

Among the gentlemen passengers are two musicians one of whom plays the violin, the other, the guitar. At evenings when the boat is still, we have music, and sometimes dancing. The day is given to sewing, knitting, reading, making tatting, &c. We rise quite early in the morning, which necessitates an after dinner nap. The ladies are very industrious, and at the same time lively.

The children have school a little while in the morning, after which they amuse themselves with games, running and romping. All the little girls have their dollies; today they have all been delighted by some

whistles which a gentleman made of willow procured on the bank when the boat stopped to wood. This is one of our chief excitements. We watch the men as they tie the steamer; throw out their plank and running quickly up the bank either take wood from the piles already prepared, or failing to find these set to work among the immense quantities of driftwood which line the banks for a long distance on one side [of] the river, varying, as the channel changes, to the opposite shore. We have twice stopped to wood today and have run about seventy-five miles which is doing very well. I believe our distance from Omaha is one hundred and twenty-five miles. . . .

Sabbath Evening [May 19]

All the day yesterday we were obliged to remain tied to the bank, owing to the storm of wind and rain which prevailed. Just before sunset we had a shower of rain accompanied by thunder and lightning, after which the sun came out clear and bright; and a most beautiful rainbow was plainly defined against the eastern sky. We were then obliged to change our position since the sand was drifting in about our boat so rapidly that we might be entirely laid upon land in the morning.

At four o'clock A.M. we were in motion, and have made a "very good run" today. I will tell you something of the way in which this day has been spent.

We had breakfast about seven o'clock, and for exercise went out for a walk on the guards and ventured to the upper deck, to view the operation of wooding. . . . In many cases the Indians or Half-Breeds have cut and piled the wood and with them the sale is to be negotiated. We have seen today probably one hundred Indians belonging to the Winnebago Mission. The squaws in some instances carried their papposes [sic] at their backs. Their clothing consisted of a coarse undergarment with a blanket blue, red, black, or white thrown about their shoulders. These red-skins are all friendly and many speak the English language.

That portion of the day not given to viewing the scenery and inhabitants of the country, has been mostly spent in reading. We had a Sabbath School for the children this afternoon, the exercises of which were singing, reading a selection from the Scriptures, repeating the Lord's Prayer, and asking questions concerning a few verses (given out as the subject of the lesson) from the sermon on the Mount.

While the children were rehearsing some of their little songs this morning, I could hardly restrain the tears as the familiar strains were home to my ear, and I thought when and where I had last heard them.

It is indeed a joy to know that although far from friends, we cannot go beyond the reach of prayer and of Christian influences. Last Sabbath we attended since at the Methodist Church in Council Bluffs.

3. [Virginia City] *Montana Post*, July 20, 1867.

4. Elizabeth Chester Fisk's 610 letters covering the period from 1864 through 1893 are found in Fisk Family Papers, Montana Historical Society, Helena.



Dining hall of the Helena, an Upper Missouri steamboat that was larger than Lizzie's Little Rock, with stateroom doors visible on both sides.

There were none of those objectionable features sometimes seen in their mode of worship, and we were interested, and edified I trust.

We shall be at Sioux City tomorrow, quite early in the day and from there I shall send my letter. . . . We are quite well. The bracing air gives us enormous appetites, and our food is of the best. . . .

Steamer Little Rock
May 24th, 1867

My dear Fannie:

The weather has been very cold and rainy all the week. On Monday at noon we reached Sioux City. Nearly all the ladies went on shore, and made a number of purchases at the dry goods stores in the place. As it was raining, and I had no special business, I remained on the steamer. . . .

One never tires of the constantly varying beauty of the landscapes; look out at which hour you will, there is ever something new. The Indians, too, are always interesting. I wish I could give you an idea of their grotesque appearance as they stand grouped upon the bank, whenever our boat is stopped.

Here, first and foremost, stands a tall chief, his straight, black hair falling upon his shoulders, and wrapped about him a buffalo robe. As he raises his arms to salute the passing boat we find that unlike many another he has some clothing besides his robe, and all his dress, made much like civilized people's, is

heavily ornamented with beads, and in addition he wears a string of these about his neck. In these last particulars he only imitates or is imitated by a Broadway belle; the only difference being that his wampum is far finer and handsomer than that of his fair eastern disciple. By his side we see an Indian trader, making a fortune, we suppose, by his association with the dusky aboriginies of the country, but becoming constantly more and more degraded, and in many cases taking a wife from among the squaws of the tribe with whom he is associated.

The women of the group on which we are looking, oh, how gaunt and worn and weary they look! Their clothing, so poor and scanty, a mere petticoat, and a shawl or blanket about their shoulders. "The noble red man of the west" are only myth, and the beautiful Indian maids are equally shadowy and unheard of in this country.

Many of the families have comfortable dwelling houses, glass in the windows, with doors and chimneys, but one look at the faces of the inmates of these dwellings is sufficient to convince one of the miseries and discomforts of barbarism.

We reach Ft. Randall tomorrow. We advance slowly but surely on our journey. . . .

Steamer Little Rock
May 26th, 1867

To the dear ones at home:

You are aware it is not my custom to write letters on Sunday; but I think I cannot better improve a portion of this quiet Sabbath day than in writing to you. All the waking hours of the day cannot be profitably given to reading even if our library of religious books was more ample than we find it. I have just come from Sabbath School which is every week increasing in numbers. Mr. [P. V.] Jackson, the young man who first proposed the measure and who is the leader of all the exercises, should certainly receive much praise for his interest and zeal in the work. He is quite young, and is making his first trip to the mountains, where he will prove a most valuable acquisition if he there evinces the same love for Christ and his work. There were two other gentlemen present today for the first time. But it is a matter of surprise and grief to me to find people so ignorant of the Bible as many of these ladies who are my traveling companions. It may be they are just as slightly acquainted with all other books. This sad ignorance cannot be asserted of the New England women, of whom there are several on the steamer; only of the southern and western women.

Many forms of speech used by them are, to me, new and amusing. In addressing a person or calling to one at a little distance they will say "Oh-Addie", "oh'lisa", joining the name and interjection as if they were one word and giving an accent which the pen

[would?] fail to represent. They say "maw" and "paw" which, however well it may sound for a little child, seems very weak and foolish when coming from the lips of grown people. Another misuse or mispronunciation is in the word *here*; for instance "Come *yer*, my daughter" a mother will say. . . .

We stopped early yesterday morning at Ft. Randall [Pickstown, S.D.] and at about eight o'clock at Cedar Island [now under Lake Francis Case]. While new cams were put in the wheels, we ladies had the nicest ramble in the woods. We gathered flowers, we walked about through the underbrush or fallen trees and exalted in our freedom. . . .

Yesterday afternoon the *Octavia* passed us. She carries between two and three hundred passengers who sleep on the floor and put up with many inconveniences for the sake of a short trip. She expects to go through in thirty days and Capt. Doyle thinks she will do so.⁵ If we could only have engaged passage on her while in St. Louis, but we did not then know of her proposed trip.

Our steamer is doing very nicely and we must be patient, still it is very hard to see other boats pass by. The time is not long except on Sunday and I have never been lonely and homesick except once or twice on that day. . . .

I think of you today attending church, and Sabbath School, perhaps, and picture to myself the manner in which all the hours of the day are spent. It must be nearly ended with you since in this far north western country the sun is sinking in the west. . . .

Like everyone else on the boat I "played sick" yesterday. We all are so very hungry when meal-time comes and eat so heartily, and then can take so little exercise that we have at least one on the sick list every day. It is impossible too, to keep out of a draught night or day, hence everybody has a cold. The children go about coughing and I *sneeze* just for a change. . . .

We have everything that is good to eat. Fresh and corned beef and pork, ham, tripe, liver, vegetables, and canned fruits. Capt. Doyle has purchased beaves or mutton and sometimes both at several towns along the way. Should the supply of provisions fail, which is not at all probable, we have private stores, crackers and biscuit, canned meats and fruits.

Robert and myself amuse ourselves evenings by reading, or playing dominoes; nearly all the other people play cards instead. . . .

Friday morning,
June 1st, '67

My dear Fannie;

We reached [Fort Sully, south of Pierre, S.D.] on Thursday morning. Anticipating a salute from its guns, our cannon was loaded and preparations made to return the compliment; the ladies being admon-

ished not to be alarmed. But our preparations were needless since no salute came. We remained at the landing only a few minutes to mail letters. The soldiers who thronged the bank refused to take these to their office unless rewarded by a bottle of whiskey. This the Captain of our steamer refused to give them; but when the officers came down from the fort the difficulty was quickly settled and the soldiers ordered to their quarters forthwith.

We passed and were again passed by three steamers on Thursday, playing "bo peep" with them, as one or another of the little fleet stopped to wood; but at last we came out ahead and left them in the distance.

Yesterday morning we overtook three other boats, and traveled in company with them during the day. At night two of them tied up with us at the edge of a grove of timber. We reached this point just before sunset and all the ladies rushed on shore. Beyond the grove was a "bench" as westerners term it, a level stretch of land, covered with bunch grass and dotted with the most beautiful wild flowers. Some of these grow in gardens, one might almost say, and the earth at a little distance was crimson, yellow, blue, or white, with their delicate blossoms. I have pressed some of these which I will send you. Winding across the plain were numerous buffalo tracks, running parallel and leading to the river's edge. These paths, clearly defined among the springing grass, have also been used by the Indians as we perceived their trails, which were marks along the side of the track where they had worn away the grass by dragging the sticks, or thills, which were attached to the backs of their ponies.

Speaking of the flowers—many of these are the same that we find east under cultivation. We have passed acres of Missouri Currant bushes now in full bloom, and their perfume is home to us even as we pass by on the water. . . .

We found on the plains, too, the head and horns of a buffalo. Some of the ladies preserved a tooth, but as I could not send it home, I did not care for any relic. . . .

Tuesday P.M. [June 4]

As we approach near Ft. Rice [south of Bismarck, N.D.], I will again resume the pen.

On Saturday after I had laid aside my writing we had quite an excitement occasioned by one of our deck hands falling in the river. He was standing on a log and endeavoring to cut it in two, when it rolled over carrying him with it. He immediately struck boldly out and swam for the nearest shore. The current was very strong and many feared that he would be exhausted ere help could reach him; but in less

5. The *Octavia* arrived at Fort Benton on June 20, 1867, twenty-five days before the *Little Rock* did.

time than I have occupied in telling the story, the yawl was at his side and taking a seat in the stern he took an oar and steered the little boat back to the steamer.

Some of our lady passengers behaved very foolishly on the occasion, clasping their hands frantically, and screaming delightfully. The impulse was strong to throw *them* over and wash away some of their would be ladyisms. . . .

Early on Monday morning Capt. Doyle came rushing into the cabin and shouting something to the men (we were all seated at breakfast); I could only distinguish these words, "Take the guns." Our men were out wooding and my first thought was that they had been attacked by Indians.

But some one shouted "Buffalo" another "Antelope" and a third "Elk" and nearly every man on the steamer ran on shore to join in the chase. One of the animals which proved to be Antelope escaped but the others attempted to swim the river. Our yawl was lowered and the exciting chase began. Every stroke of the oars brought the men nearer their game and when at last they came alongside and raised the poor frightened beast on the yawl, a shout went up from all the watching crowd on the shore. . . . The meat when roasted resembled beef. It has however a flavor not found in the latter meat. . . .

We spent the greater part of Saturday and Sunday on a sand bar which is not the most delectable state of things to be imagined. Still our steamer is doing well. We have passed every boat that started with us except the Octavia, and tomorrow eve we reach Ft. Rice—we would have been there last night but for the delay. . . . From Fort Rice to Benton is thirteen hundred miles.

Every day is making nearer and dearer these friends who form a part of our little world on the "Little Rock." We make morning calls and afternoon visits, and enjoy evening promenades on the upper deck. . . .

June 10, 1867

Last Saturday was a day filled with excitement. First and foremost, our steamer stopped to wood, and according to custom our first relief corps were sent out on picket. Espying a number of antelope running through a defile of the mountains, five shots were fired. The mate immediately, supposing an attack had been made by Indians, ordered his crew on board steamer, the signal was given recalling pickets and soon the rope would have been cut and our steamer out in the river. Fortunately, a true statement of facts was made and the fears of our people dissipated. . . .

For myself, I am happy to state that I was calm and self possessing even though my cheeks may have blanched and my heart sent up one swift prayer to God for Robert, who I knew was on shore. . . .

But the closing episode of the day was saddest of all. One of our deck hands lost his footing and fell in the river and being unable to swim, was drowned before help could reach him.⁶ He was a Frenchman who had traveled all over the world, and has recently been in Maximilian's army. Every exertion was made to save him and we each and every one grieved to go on and leave the body which will probably never be recovered. The nature of the river is such that a body lost in its waters is immediately covered with sand and no trace of it can ever again be found. . . .

Tuesday Eve. [June 11]

. . . on the steamer we had a dance in which I played the part of interested spectator. These little dances are of frequent occurrence and both gentlemen and ladies seem to enjoy them. Quite a powerful influence has been brought to bear upon me to induce me to learn this accomplish [*sic*] but I have not the slightest desire to participate and indeed have less taste for it every time I witness a dance.

This morning I rose bright and early and found time for a little walk and half hour's sewing before breakfast. We had an accession to our number of three Indians who came down from [Ft.] Berthold [at the mouth of the Little Missouri River] in a tub canoe made of buffalo hides. Their object was to ride back on the steamer, procure something to eat, and do a little begging for themselves and families.

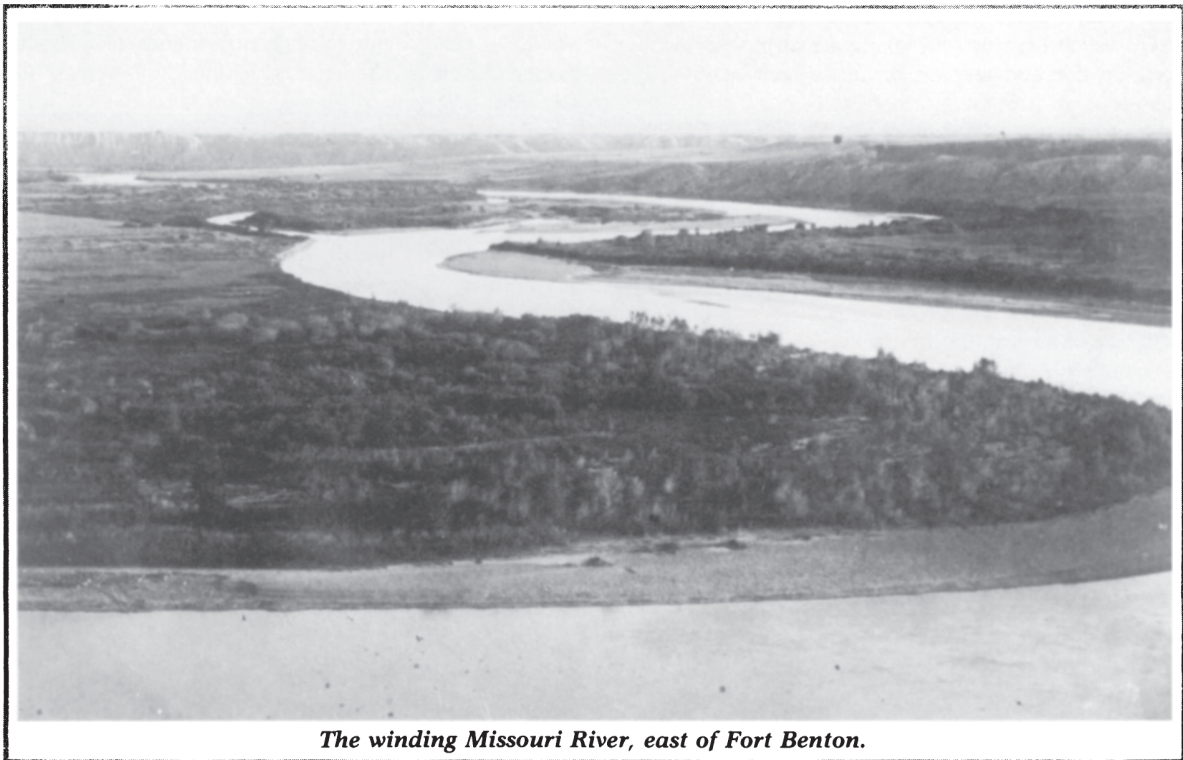
Robert and myself were standing just outside our stateroom door when one of these braves came around and shaking hands with Robert pointed to me saying, "Squaw." "Yes" was the reply. He then took hold of his pantaloons and raised his long forefinger to tell us he had but one pair. Robert told him in much the same manner that he had only the same number.

"Big Injun" then asked where we were going and hinted in very gentle terms that he would like one of my dresses for his squaw. Just then the breakfast bell rang and we left our brave; but he was not at all bashful, and, entering the ladies' cabin he seated himself complacently in our midst, having first shaken hands with each person present.

He then proceeded to state by means of signs his wants and wishes for himself, squaw and papoose. The ladies talked of making a trade with him but on reaching the Fort it was not concluded.

Long before we reached Berthold the Indians large and small came to meet us, and running along the bank they snatched eagerly at the bits of meat and hard bread which were thrown to them. I wish my eastern friends might have seen these savages, their

6. He was John P. Valtin. *Montana Post*, July 20, 1867, gives the date as June 5, a Wednesday, but Robert Fisk's *Helena Weekly Herald*, July 17, 1867, gives June 8, Saturday; both list Valtin as a passenger, not a deck hand. Another passenger would drown a month later, near the mouth of the Judith River.



The winding Missouri River, east of Fort Benton.

faces painted deepest red, their wild eyes gleaming and the long hair streaming over their shoulders. They wore little clothing, except blankets and many of the children were entirely naked. They rolled and tumbled and pushed each other about, and displayed all the savageness and ferocity of beasts.

The most prominent of the chiefs was an old man whose face was dyed the deepest red and even the parting of his hair was made of the same color. His clothing was made after a civilized fashion and attached to a bright orb and beads worn about his neck were two medals, one of which was presented to him during his visit at Washington two years since, and which bore the head of [President] Andy Jackson. A buffalo robe beautifully embroidered in red, white, and blue, and an immense pair of blue spectacles, together with the plumes of bright colors in his hair completed his most striking toilette. As he stood with folded arms contemplating the people in steamer and on shore he was truly "a study for a painter." . . .

Monday Eve. [June 17]

We have passed the most northern point of our journey⁷ and our course is now almost due west, the river is very crooked and current swift and strong. We met the June rise in the water below [Fort] Rice and the river has not fallen but is coming up again.

This country is ever new. The bluffs for the last thousand miles show a vein of coal, occasionally lost to sight and then again cropping out distinctly. Many

of the hills which here rise in sharp abrupt peaks are streaked with cinnabar.⁸ There is not a doubt but that precious metals will one day be discovered through all this region. On the summit of the loftiest of these hills are the petrified bones of fishes and marine animals. Some terrible upheaval must have cast these little mountains up, and the sun and wind and rain have carved their sides in every conceivable form and shape.

A steamer is coming. In haste! Good-bye—We are at [Fort] Union tomorrow.

Steamer Little Rock
June 20th, 1867

My dear Fannie:

Since we left Fort Buford on Tuesday morning we have journeyed about one hundred miles. The river is narrowing here, the scenery becoming wilder and more picturesque. We met with an accident yesterday which proved quite a serious one for us. The escape pipe burst and before the injury could be repaired thirty bundles of Robert's paper which was stored in the hold were wet and very seriously damaged. We had it brought to the upper deck and yesterday afternoon and the greater part of today has been spent in opening, spreading and drying. We disliked to have the paper stored in the hold at first, fearing it might heat and spoil but we did not anticipate an acci-

7. Near present-day Williston, North Dakota.

8. A red, mercuric sulfide, the only known ore of mercury.

dent of this kind. The outside quires of every bundle are of no use except for wrapping paper while those on the inside are very much injured not only by the hot water and steam which penetrated to the innermost parts of the compactly arranged bundles, but by the dirt, and stains from the brown wrappers which have given to all the paper a gilt edge. We are however, glad that no more serious injury was done.

Since Captain Doyle recovered from his lameness,⁹ sufficiently to take the helm nothing has "gone right" as he expressed it; . . . we have but half a crew owing to illness, wounds, and bruises and you can imagine that the working of our steamer is not the most smooth and agreeable. The ladies too, with very few exceptions, have had some little misunderstandings and there are jealousies and cliques—Do not fear that I am involved. I would be ashamed if I could not mingle with my fellow passengers and feel kindly toward all. Some of them I esteem highly and when I am weary of their society or they of mine there is always as a relief the comparative quiet of our stateroom and, which is always a delight with no danger of misconstruction or a quarrel, the society of my beloved husband—

Monday Eve. [June 24]

For the last three days I have been thinking of the duties I owe in the way of completing my letter, but on Saturday we met with an accident which so completely discouraged every one that I feared I might send home a very blue letter if I attempted to write. This accident was the bursting of both our boilers.

We had met with a storm, which, quite severe on the river, was even more serious in the interior, and raised all the streams, the Missouri among the rest. This rise in the water stirred up the mud so that a glass of liquid taken from the river showed fully one half a sediment of dirt. This sediment was deposited in the boilers, and becoming hardened and at last baked, it kept the water from the iron which in consequence was melted and fell out in great pieces.

We could not travel and a delay of several days, possibly of a week takes place. A more elongated set of visages than those about our tea table on Saturday could not well be imagined, and I must own that even my own faith and hope failed for a time and I could only look on the dark side. I did not care for myself but when I thought of the delay for Robert and the long absence from his business and his anxiety to be through, all these added to the loss of so much of his paper were sufficient to dishearten anyone. But with the morning came brighter calmer thoughts, and when another day came I could even hope for good coming out of the evil. . . .

9. On June 6, after leaving Fort Rice, Captain Doyle fell into the ship's hold and hurt both legs. He remained in bed for two days following the accident and was on crutches for at least a week after that.

Last evening, we went out, Robert and I, for a little walk. It was delightful to ramble along shore, to gather the sweet flowers and listen to the singing of the birds. We gained, at length, the summit of a little knoll, and here we sat, admiring the surrounding country, and reading our Bible which we brought out with us— As we sat thus in the stillness of the summer evening, I fancied I could hear the sound of a church bell borne over the hills, and a thought of the dear ones so far away seemed to transport me at once to their sides, and my happiness for the time seemed complete—

Today we have been packing away our papers again. This proves quite an arduous task but happily it is nearly completed. Mr. Fisk has won the esteem, I might almost say, affection, of the passengers by his equanimity and patience under misfortunes. . . . If we reach [Fort Benton] in safety I would not fear to undertake a journey to the interior of Africa or to set out on a voyage around the world. . . .

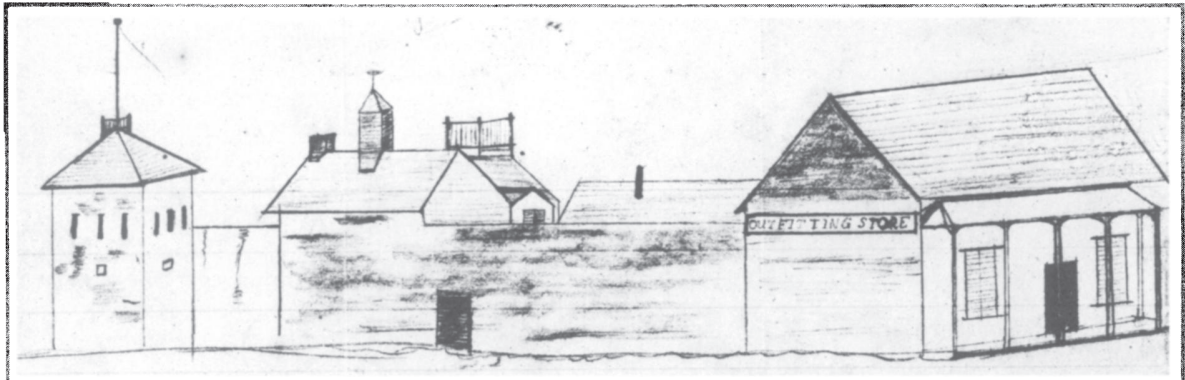
Sunday Morn. [June 30]

The morning of Thursday found us again under way. The last three days of our stay at "Burnt Boiler["] as we named the point were delightful. We walked, we fished, we gathered flowers, and the children had a picnic. . . .

On Friday evening we passed Milk River. There were then five hundred and thirty miles of our journey remaining. We passengers are almost led to conclude that our officers being paid by the month and having no hope of making another trip are determined to prolong this voyage till its utmost limit. Our potatoes are nearly gone, our white sugar *ditto*, and we had no milk for our coffee this morning.

Everyone is "down on" the Captain of the boat. All the preparations for our journey were of the cheapest kind, even a sufficient number of men were not hired. Owing to the want of care much of the freight consisting in great measure of groceries have been allowed to spoil. Robert finds his paper in a most miserable condition. It has become swollen and mildewed and musty and the mice have nibbled paper and string. He objected at the very first to having it stored in the hold, but of course did not command the boat and could not have his way in the matter. More than two thirds of the bundles have to be opened and rechecked. He can collect damages of the steamer as other parties are doing but three times the cost of the papers would not restore this to him or render it possible to purchase more in the east before another year comes around. The *want* is more than the *worth* of it.

I have grumbled sufficiently for this time I think. I would not tell you of these troubles were we not so nearly through— Ten days or two weeks now, and then— I do not dare think much of it. . . .



Lizzie's own sketch, sent home in a letter, of Fort Benton "as seen from the steamer" upon arrival.

Sunday Morn. July 7

The past week has glided by leaving but little trace of its passage. The great event was the celebration of the Fourth. We, Robert and I, joined Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Norris, Mr. & Mrs. Prouty, in a picnic during the afternoon. The morning hours were lonely and after dinner I came to my room and as thoughts of home were passing through my mind I could not restrain the tears.

But for our picnic which was a most delightful occasion. Our entertainment consisting of articles taken from our own private store, was composed of an oyster stew, canned pears and peaches, and crackers. We had, in addition, wine, ale, and ice water. That we all thought of home you may be assured, still we had a merry time and the day will long be remembered . . .

We have suffered much during the last ten days from the intense heat. I have never experienced such dry, burning air as we get here on this little tug. But Benton was never so near as today and the showers of two or three evenings previous have cooled the air and we are living in hope.

It is probable we shall be at Benton before another Sabbath comes around. This we hope and expect . . .

Helena, Montana, July [21], 1867

My dear Mother:

After three long months of journeying the wanderers are "at home."

Our steamer reached Fort Benton on the afternoon of Sunday last [July 14]. We came into port amid the firing of cannon and shouts of the people assembled on shore. We had been long and anxiously expected and many fears entertained concerning our safety. Our passengers were more delighted than words can express to know that their long "Misery" was at an end, and we felt that we had escaped many perils and dangers which we had come to fear each day in a greater degree . . .

The most unpleasant things have an end and so had our journey on this *delightful* little steamer.

From Fort Benton, Lizzie and Robert travelled quickly to Helena by stagecoach. After taking care of business and political matters associated with the *Helena Herald's* interim management, Robert returned to Fort Benton and accompanied his paper and presses to Helena. The young couple took up temporary residence with James Fisk's family and began a life together in Montana that spanned thirty-five years and included the raising of six children.

Montana's territorial frontier exhibited stark differences to civilization in "the states." Lizzie's trip on the *Little Rock* had been a prelude to contrasts which continued to jar her sensibilities. Southerners, Indians, and Methodists abounded in Montana from her perspective. At best, she tolerated their presence. Women of culture, men of principle, and Congregationalists of conviction appeared all too seldom, and Lizzie bemoaned their absence. Yet she tried to adjust. "I like the place much," she wrote of Helena within weeks after her arrival. "It is not like home, but there is a wide field for usefulness here."

Lizzie made her influence felt. In addition to her family, she devoted time to church work, temperance movements, schools, civic improvements, and the local poor committee. Lizzie read voraciously and then donated her books to Helena's free public library, which she helped found. She taught her children to read and write before they entered school. In addition, they played musical instruments, painted, attended and participated in community theater. Elizabeth Chester Fisk took advantage of the wide field of usefulness open to her in Montana Territory; she made her influence felt; and she documented the civilizing of the western frontier in delightful, candid letters "To the dear ones at home."

REX C. MEYERS is Chairman of the Division of Humanities and Social Science at Western Montana College, Dillon. He has published many times in these pages, and is co-author, with William L. Lang, of *Montana: Our Land and People*. Prof. Myers is currently working on a book-length edited version of Elizabeth Fisk's letters.