

**BISMARCK TO FORT BENTON BY STEAMBOAT
IN THE YEAR 1869**

By Matilda Senieur

(We were enroute from Peru, Illinois, to Helena, and the trip up the Missouri river was the last lap before taking the stage at Fort Benton for the 150 mile overland trip to our destination.)

We left Bismarck in June on the *North Alabama*, that being the only trip up the river ever made by this boat. She drew too much water and seemed to cling to every sand bar we encountered and ran into every snag in her course—we were on one bar three days. At night the boat was tied up at the bank, for the reason, I suppose, that the pilot was unable to see the channel of the river. During the day the boat often stopped, mostly at wood-yards, where it was loaded with wood for firing purposes. The passengers were usually glad of the opportunity to go ashore, especially when stops were made at different military posts, or stockades, where it was perfectly safe for them to do so. The only time I ever saw X. Beidler was at one of these forts. One of the queer sights of this trip was that of a squaw carrying a papoose with stiff, black, curly hair about two inches long standing out perfectly straight, like small cork screws. One night it seemed impossible to find a good landing and it was nine o'clock before we were tied up and it was near a large Indian camp or village. As the Indians seemed quite "tame" about a dozen of the passengers went on land to visit the camp and at the first tepee found that it was occupied by at least two or three families. As we walked through, one of the squaws touched the hair of a woman of the boat party, calling the attention of the other Indians to its color and quantity, it being a rich, dark red, the braids covering her head. It is needless to say that the woman wished she was safely back on the boat, feeling sure she was about to be scalped. Hair of this kind was a novelty to the Indians.

We saw herd after herd of buffalo; in one there must have been several thousand, and the noise made by them sounded like thunder in the distance. At one point the captain was at the wheel and saw, some distance ahead of the boat, a large herd headed for the opposite shore, which he could see it would be impossible for them to climb as it was a steep bank or precipice, and, true enough, when they reached it they had to turn and swim

back by which time the boat had reached their course and it ran into them. Everyone was on deck looking at the unusual spectacle of a buffalo at close range. On each side of the cabin were racks of guns, kept loaded in case of trouble with the Indians, and these were taken down by passengers who shot recklessly and wildly, trying to kill a buffalo, and the deck hands laid down on deck trying to kill them with axes. All the guns were emptied but not a buffalo did they get and the river seemed to be a river of blood.

One of our main stopping places was at the Musselshell stockade, which we reached during a rain storm. The passengers all wanted to get off and go into the stockade but the captain was uncertain as to the safety of the visit but, after an investigation, decided it would be safe and those who cared to left the boat. While here we learned of an encounter the people in the stockade had had the previous March with Indians, in which a dozen or more of the latter had been killed. They told us that it would perhaps not have been safe at this time for us to visit the stockade had it not been for the rain but that Indians do not care to travel in rainy weather. In the store at this stockade were shelves on which were candy jars filled with noses and ears of Indians in alcohol, killed in the recent disturbance; also on the shelves were skulls of Indians with the name of the Indian on each.

Living in the stockade at this time was a white woman who had been scalped the month before; she wore a calico cap which covered her head. She admitted to us that she had been at fault. It seems that the men at the stockade thought they had better fix up their defenses and so took a yoke of oxen and a wagon and started out to get the needed timber. This woman and a squaw who was also a member of the party in the enclosure, were anxious to go with the men as they had been closely confined all winter but they were advised by the men to remain where it was safe as they would not be able to look after them if they were attacked by Indians. However, they decided to go and the men were just loading logs on the wagon when the squaw put her head to the ground and told the rest of the party that she heard Indians approaching, and immediately the Indians appeared and began shooting. The men dropped everything, leaving the women to take care of themselves. The white woman was shot and fell, stunned. The Indians, thinking she was dead, started to scalp her, which revived her and they hit her with a club and finished scalping her. When she recovered she was alone and minus her scalp.

During one of our stops a big Indian came aboard and spied a full-length mirror in the cabin; he immediately drew up a large rocking chair and sat in it, rocking and admiring himself in the glass. When it was time for the boat to leave he didn't want to go and it took a good deal of persuasion and made him indignant but he was finally induced to go.

The rest of the journey was uneventful and we reached Fort Benton, the head of navigation on the Missouri river, several days behind schedule.