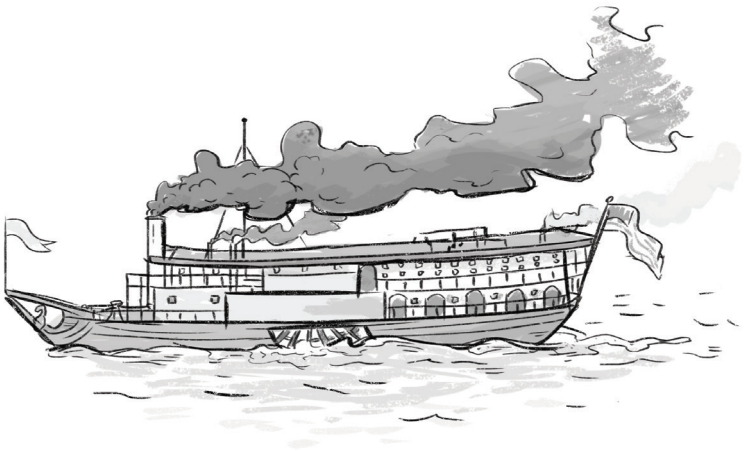
Adventures on the American Frontier

# Pioneers on the Early Waterways

Part Nine

## Buffalo Bill Rides the Far West



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The Mississippi River steamboats had become bigger and better than ever. They carried tons of freight on their main decks, while the upper decks were like floating hotels. There were hundreds of them, and they reached into every river big enough to float them. All the way up and down the Mississippi, the steamboat whistle could be heard almost any time—day or night. It was the Golden Age of the steamboat. Then two things happened at almost the same time, and the Golden Age was over.

One day the “Whoo-oo-oo!” of the steamboat whistle brought an answering whistle from the prairie. The iron horse had reached the Mississippi Valley. Locomotives could carry freight and people faster than steamboats could, and they could go to places that the rivers did not reach.

At about the same time, the steamboats went to war. The floating hotels became troop carriers. They were battle stations and supply boats all during the Civil War.

When the war was over, the railroad had taken a tight hold on travel and freight business. The only places where steamboats were still needed were far from cities where the railroad had not reached. Two railroads ran across the state of Missouri and were working their way across the plains to the west.

But far off in the northern Rocky Mountains and in the Badlands of the Dakotas, no one had built a railroad. Out there, the land was still wild. Steamboats traveled up the Missouri River to its end in Montana. They followed the rivers that ran into the Missouri, too, including the Yellowstone River—biggest of them all.

Grant Marsh, who had once been first mate for Mark Twain, had become captain of his own steamboat, and he had gone as far up the Missouri River as any other

steamboatman, and even farther up the Yellowstone River than other captains had gone. He had carried hunters and scouts, as well as men who hoped to find gold in the Montana hills.

But in the 1870s, his passengers were mostly soldiers. His boat, the *Far West*, was hired to help the U.S. government fight against the Native Americans in the Indian Wars, and by 1876, Captain Marsh was carrying men and supplies where the fighting was heaviest.