

*Adventures on the American Frontier*

# PIONEER SHOW PEOPLE

Part Three

Doc Spaulding and the Floating Palace



A Royal Fireworks Production

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By the 1850s, there were showboats traveling up and down the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers, bringing plays and other shows to the people who came to the boats to see them. These boats had started out as simple flatboats with theaters built on them, but it wasn't long before they became bigger and better. Now they were great, two-story theaters set onto a barge. A few had their own steam engines, but most of them were pushed by a small steamboat. The showboats were as fine as any theater on land.



In the spring of 1856, a big circus showboat, the *Floating Palace*, was tied up on the river in southern Ohio.

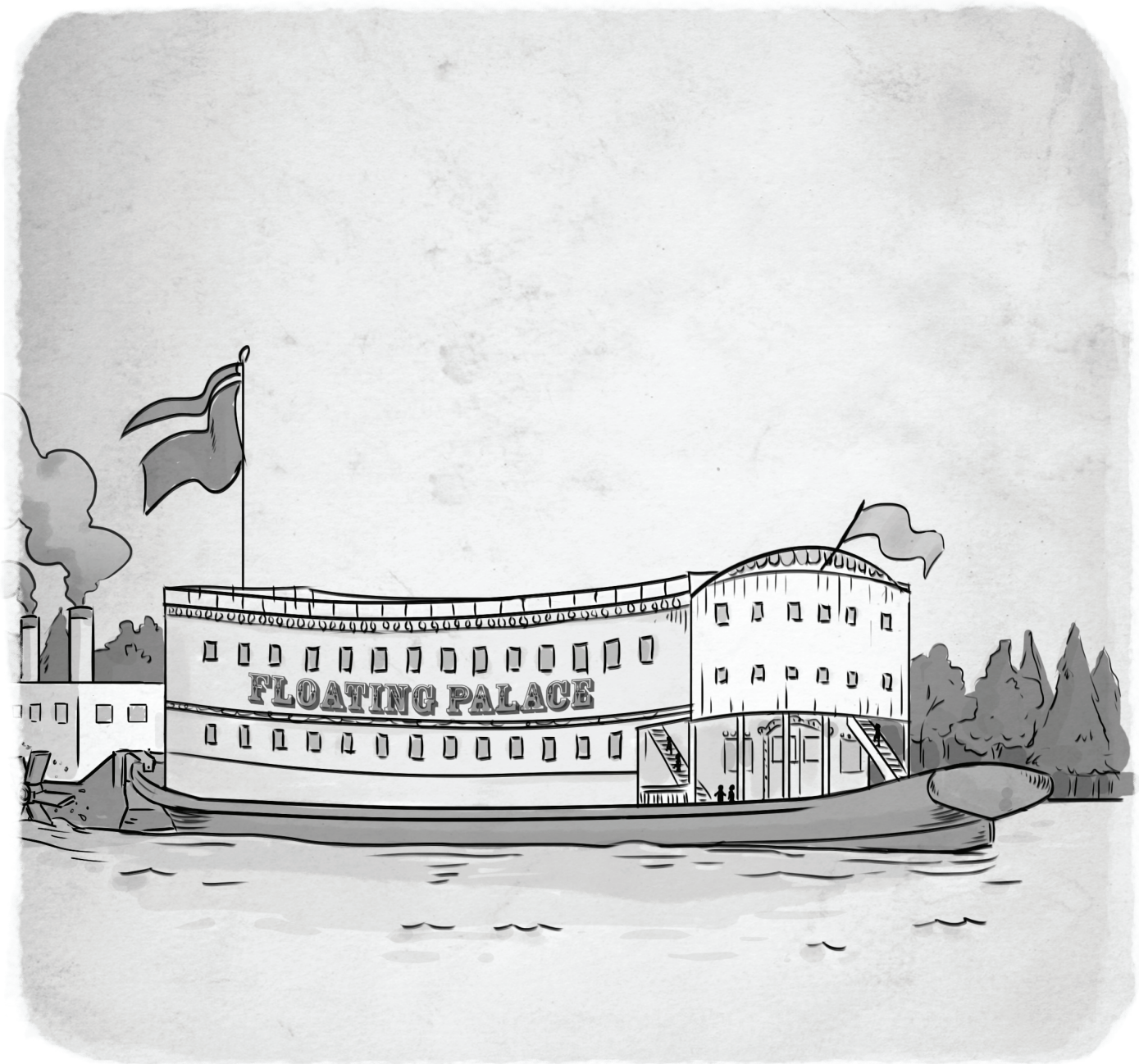
Owned by Doc Spaulding, the *Floating Palace* and its "tow," the steamboat *James Raymond*, were different from the other showboats. Spaulding & Rogers Circus Company had decided to have their circus shows right on the boat, instead of having to unload everything and set up tents on land. But the company also put on plays and other shows. For all this, they needed many



people, room to keep the circus animals, space in the showboat for the circus ring and the swings and ropes for the acrobats, and a theater with a stage for the plays.

The *Floating Palace* and the *James Raymond* had all this and more. Fourteen-year-old Ralph Keeler, who longed to be a famous stage actor, signed up to work on the big boats. The first time he had seen the *Floating Palace*, his eyes had nearly popped out of his head.

“Boy, it sure is big!” he said.



Both boats gleamed with white paint. On the sides of the showboat, in great red and gold letters, were the words "Floating Palace." The banner flying from the mast said the same thing. At the bow flew the American flag. From the stern flew a red and gold flag with a horse and the circus company name on it.

The owner, Dr. Spaulding, had a big mustache and a pointed beard. He was a doctor because he had learned all about medicines and how to mix them properly.

