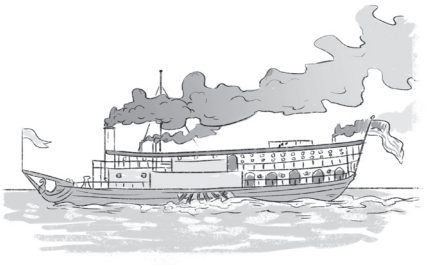
Adventures on the American Frontier

Pioneers on the Early Waterways

Revised Edition



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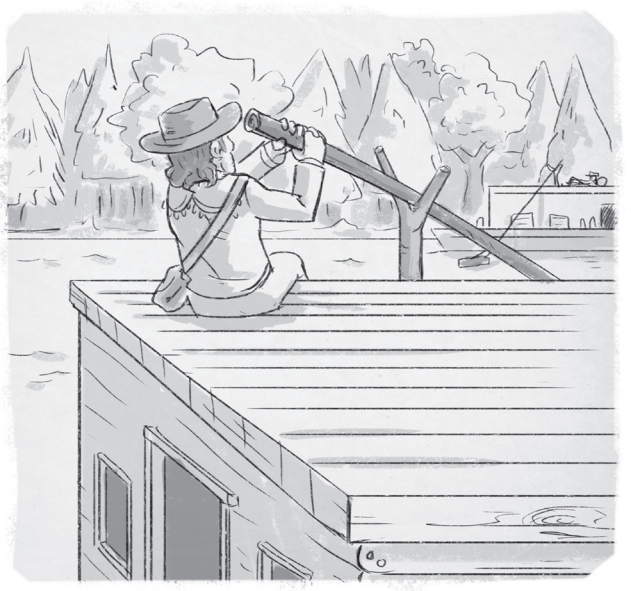
Davy Crockett and the Ring-Tailed Roarer



Davy Crockett sat on the roof of a flatboat, one arm hooked over the long steering oar at the back of the boat. The boat floated slowly down the Ohio River, needing little help from the four men of the crew. Davy leaned back, resting against the forked stick that held the steering oar.

It was lazy, quiet day back in the early 1800s, when the United States was a new country just beginning to settle the land along the Ohio River and the many rivers that fed into it. People who traveled in the frontier country did so either

by horseback over the narrow trails through the woods or by boat on the rivers. The Ohio River was the great highway to the west. It led to the Mississippi River, and boats could float all the way down to the city of New Orleans near the Gulf of Mexico.

Davy Crockett liked the life of a scout or a hunter better than the life of a boatman, but he and his friends had a load of furs and bacon—items to sell that would bring them a little money. They had put together a flatboat of rough oak boards, loaded it, and were off for New Orleans. There they would sell the furs and the bacon. Then they would take the flatboat apart and sell the oak boards for lumber, for the boxlike flatboats were too clumsy to be poled back up the river against the current. The flatboatmen would make their way back home on foot.

The flatboat drifted on. Davy moved the steering oar a little to head the boat around a bend. The quiet of the summer afternoon made him sleepy, and soon he settled back again. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open when he saw a keelboat pulling alongside the flatboat. A big boatman lay on the other boat deck, fast asleep, his mouth wide open as he snored. It was more than Davy could stand.

"I can't let him go on like that," Davy muttered. "The poor man will swallow a fly!" Quickly, he lifted the long steering oar from the water. He swung it neatly over onto the deck of the keelboat and tapped it against the sleeper's head.

The whiskery boatman was on his feet before Davy could get the steering oar back into place. He rubbed his head and glared around to see what had hit him. His eyes fell on

Davy, who was leaning on the steering oar as if nothing had happened.

"Hello, stranger!" the man bellowed. "Who asked you to crack my head?"

Davy grinned and yelled back, "Didn't mind doing you the favor at all, my friend. I didn't think you wanted to sunburn your teeth."

On both boats, the other boatmen got to their feet, for they saw some fun coming. They kept the boats alongside each other to see what would happen. The angry keelboatman was arching his neck and neighing like a horse. This was a sign, known to men of the rivers, that he wanted Davy to battle him in a fistfight.

Davy understood. He tucked his hands up under his armpits and flapped his arms as if they were wings. "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" he crowed. That meant, in the boatmen's language, "I'll fight you!"

The keelboatman began marching around the deck. He strutted about, swelling his red-shirted chest and beating on it with his fists. He circled around, not looking at Davy at all. At last he stopped, facing the flatboat where Davy stood, arms folded on his chest. He spat a great chaw of tobacco into the river and then began the next step in starting a fight. He opened his mouth wide and bellowed, "YI-I-I-i-i-i! Ya-HOO! Yow-ow, OOO, yah-hoo-OOO! I'm half-horse 'n' half-alligator! I'm a ring-tailed roarer and a ring-tailed screamer, too! I'm a reg'lar snapping turtle, and look out for me! I can lick my weight in wildcats and swallow them whole! I can outrun, outjump, and outfight any man in sight. I'll be on yer back quicker 'n greased lightnin', and if yer a game chicken, I'll pick all the feathers off'n you! Whoop! WHOO-OOP!" He beat on his chest again, tossed back the tangled black hair that hung down to his shoulders, and neighed again.

Davy still stood on the flatboat deck. He knew better than to stop the "ring-tailed roarer" in the middle of his boast. But when the last neigh died out, it was his turn to act.

"Give us no more of your chin music!" he yelled. "Cock-a-doodle-doo! Tie up your boat, and set yer kickers on shore. I'll give you a licking that'll set yer hide to stingin' and take the boastin' out of ye for good!" Davy leaped in the air and crowed again, flapping his "wings" as he did so.

The men on both boats were happy to help. They soon had the flatboat and the keelboat tied to the trunks of trees that grew along the riverbank. The "ring-tailed roarer" took a cap from his head and laid it carefully on the deck. In the cap was a big red feather—the sign that he had fought and

beaten every man who had cared to fight him. Then he jumped to the shore. When he got there, he limbered up his legs by leaping up and down.

Davy, too, headed for the shore, as did a number of the boatmen. It was when Davy stood in front of the "half-horse, half-alligator" that he saw how big the man was. Davy knew that he would have to be fast on his feet and duck most of the blows if he were to keep from being beaten.

Again the boatman leaped into the air. "Take care how I light on you!" he cried to Davy.

Davy did his best to take care, but the first blow from the big man shook him so that he felt as if his insides had turned to jelly. But before the keelboatman could pull himself together for another blow, Davy was on his feet and punching hard into the man's ribs. It was like a fight between a lively dog and a clumsy, shaggy bear. Davy jumped in quickly time after time, and as quickly backed off. But sometimes he couldn't get back or duck in time, and he was well battered. He even lost some teeth in the fight. He saw that to win he would have to do as a dog would do to a bear: use his teeth.

In the rivermen's fights, there were no rules. Men could bite, kick, or do anything else to help them win. Often a keelboatman had only one ear because a man he was fighting had bitten off the other one. Davy knew that he couldn't last long enough to wear the big man down any other way, so he sank his teeth into a tender spot when he got a chance to do so, and he held on for dear life.

"Ow! OOW-ow-owoo-oo!" the ring-tailed roarer yelled. But Davy would not be shaken off. At last the flatboat crew

pulled Davy away and hurried him onto the flatboat before the keelboatman could recover. One of them untied the boat, and the others took poles and shoved the boat out into the water just as the keelboatman was about to leap aboard.

Davy's eyes were swollen nearly shut, but he could make out the blurred form of the big man still leaping around on shore, and he could hear him roaring until the flatboat rounded a bend.

Some people say that the story of Davy Crockett's fight with the keelboatman is just a tale someone made up. Others say it's true. After Davy died as a hero in the Battle of the Alamo in Texas in 1836, some papers were found that Davy had supposedly written. The fight story was on one of those papers. It ended, "And although I didn't come out second best, I took care not to wake up a ring-tailed roarer with an oar again."

Whether or not Davy's fight really took place, it's true that there were many fights like it among the boatmen, for it was their main sport. The men who poled boats up the rivers had to be strong. They were proud to be rough and tough, and each man fought to prove just how tough he was. He had to show that he was strong before a keelboat owner would give him a job, for it took strong men to move the heavy, wooden boats upriver against the current. Flatboating was much easier, for there was only the downriver trip. But keelboats were built to carry goods and people upriver, too.

Instead of being shaped like floating boxes, as flatboats were, keelboats were long and narrow. That made it easier to move them against the water, but still it took strong men to fight the river currents and pull the boats from New Orleans all the way up to places like Pittsburgh.

There were no motors or engines to help move boats in those days. The keelboats usually had tall masts, and sometimes the keelboatmen would open a big, square sail. But the wind had to be blowing the right way for the sail to be of much help. The men poled the boat up the river when they could and pulled it with a long rope when they couldn't pole it. There were also a few oars on the boat, but they didn't help much.

At New Orleans, goods were loaded onto the keelboats and put into the cargo box. The cargo box was a cabin that took up most of the space in the boat. When it was full, the upriver trip began, delivering goods to people on the farms and in the towns along the rivers.

If the water wasn't deep, four men of the crew would line up on the running board on each side of the cargo box. The

running boards were strips of deck with wooden cleats nailed to them to help the men keep from slipping. The men faced the back, or *stern*, of the boat. Each one had a pole about twenty feet long, called a setting pole. The pole's lower end was covered with iron and pointed so it could dig into the river bottom. The upper end was rounded and padded so that the boatman could lean hard on it with his shoulder.

When the men were ready, the steersman took his place on the roof of the cargo box near the back of the boat. It was his job to steer the boat with the long, flat-ended steering oar and to keep the men at the poles working together. "Stand to your poles!" he cried, and the men stood ready.

"Set poles!" he called then, and each man sank his pole's end into the river bottom.

"Down on her!" the steersman called next, and the men leaned into their work, walking toward the back of the boat, bending forward as they neared the end of the pole's reach. Sometimes they got down on their hands and knees, pushing with all their strength to keep the boat moving.

The patroon, as the steersman was called, watched. At the instant the first man reached the end of his walk, the patroon called out, "Lift poles!" Quickly, the men lifted their poles and raced back to their starting places, trying to get set for the next push before the current moved the boat backward.

Sometimes the bottom was too soft or the river too deep for poling. When that happened, the men used a rope and pulled the boat from the bank—a process called *cordelling*.

The rope was tied to the mast. From there it ran through an iron ring attached at the front of the boat, or the *prow*.

When it was time to cordelle, one of the men would swim to shore, or jump, if the boat was close enough, carrying the end of the rope with him. The other men went to the shore, too, and each took a firm grip on the rope and put it over his shoulder. They struggled along in a line, climbing over rocks, hanging onto bushes to keep from sliding into the water, slipping on muddy banks, and moving ahead the best they could as they pulled the heavy boat. If there was no place to walk, they swam.

Once in a while they used the rope in another way, called *warping*. There were always one or two little rowboats with the keelboat—*skiffs*, they called them. Two or three men would get into a skiff and, taking the rope with them, row to a strong tree on the bank some distance up the river. They wound the rope around the tree and tied it firmly. The men back on the boat then pulled hand over hand on the rope until the boat was even with the tree. By that time, a second skiff had gone upriver with another rope, which was also tied to the boat, and tied it to another tree. In that way, the boat made its slow way up the river.

Often on the cargo box roof sat the luckiest man of the crew: the fiddler. His work was to entertain the men and set a beat for them to follow in working the poles or ropes. He squawked away at his fiddle, keeping his foot tapping. Sometimes the men would sing while they worked. One of the favorite songs of the day was "Shawneetown."

Hard upon the beech oar—
She moves too slow!
All the way to Shawneetown,
Long while ago.
Some rows up, but we rows down,
All the way to Shawneetown,
Pull away, pull away!

At night, the men would tie the keelboat up at the bank. The cook would go to shore and build a fire to cook some salt pork with potatoes if they had them or corn cakes if they didn't. After supper and some drinks of whiskey, the boatmen looked for excitement. There was usually a fight then, either on the boat or in a nearby town. Sometimes they danced on the keelboat cargo box roof. When they were tired, they rolled themselves up in blankets on the shore or on the boat roof. If it rained, they huddled in the cabin with the cargo.

It was a rough life, and only rough men could take it. But at that time, keelboats were the best way to move goods upriver.

At about the same time that Davy Crockett was fighting the ring-tailed roarer, men in the East were working on something new—something that would make the job of getting people and goods upriver much easier. Soon the steamboat was born, and it changed the way people traveled in America before the roads and rails opened it up for all.