

# THE MEMORIES OF A RAFT PILOT:

## CAPTAIN J. M. TURNER



*A raftboat with a bowboat added to aid in steering the raft (Irving B. Richman, ed. History of Muscatine County, Iowa, vol. 1. Chicago, S.J. Clarke, 1911, opp. p. 80).*

In the early days of floating logs and lumber down the stream on the Mississippi river, there were five rapids pilots living at LeClaire, Iowa, at the head of the Rock island rapids. They were kept reasonably busy piloting floating rafts over the rapids. When steam-boats started to tow rafts down the Mississippi river, there seemed to be only two of these pilots that were able to make the change successfully--Captain Wesley Rambo and Captain De Forest Dorance.

When boats towing lumber and log rafts reached Dubuque, they must not let other boats pass them before they got to the head of the Rock island rapids. If a boat got by them, they might be delayed at the head of the rapids waiting for one of these pilots, as the rule was always the first boat is the first served with one of these pilots.

I have in mind one of my trips with the steamer Golden Gate. The custom was if I had a full raft, to land on the east side of the river about two miles above the railroad bridge at Dubuque and take one half of the raft through the draw of the bridge, land it about two miles below the bridge, then go back and get the other half. I arrived at Eagle Point with a fourteen-string raft of lumber just as two other boats commenced to double trip through the bridge. There was no possible chance for the Golden Gate to get ahead of them -- only to pass through the bridge with the whole raft. I had a measurement of the width of every span of every bridge on the river between Winona, Minnesota, and Quincy, Illinois, in the office on the boat. I called for the clerk and asked him to measure the width of the raft and compare that measurement with the width of the second span of the bridge on the Iowa side of the river. He soon got me the exact width and reported the span was 4 feet and 7 inches wider than the raft. It was a moderately low stage of water. The current of the river was slacker in that span than any other span in the bridge.

I did not feel that I was taking any particular risk. I knew the current was slack as I had been there before. I had a good searchlight. The Golden Gate was a powerful boat, and the only danger would be if the machinery of the boat failed to function and this could happen any other place. In addition I had oars on the bow of the raft, and there was not as much risk going through that span as there was in operating in many other parts of the river. I went through the bridge without any trouble or breakage. Our old engineer, who was on the forewatch, came to me and said: 'I have been on the river longer than you have been, and that is the best piece of piloting I ever seen on the river.' But the old man was not acquainted with all the circumstances. He only knew that the raft was nearly as wide as the span, and it was in the nighttime.

There was nobody on the boat that seemed to realize but what it was a dangerous undertaking and that I made a lucky hit, and especially at night. I heard one of my men say he did not know what crib of lumber he was going to ride on going down the river that night. Our second pilot was in bed asleep and if he was up he would not know much more than the rest of my crew. He was an old packet pilot and never could learn how to handle a raft. He was a part owner of the boat, otherwise he would not have been there.

Our crew was very much elated in getting ahead of these other two boats. They knew we were getting ahead of a couple of boats that had the reputation of what they called 'sooners' and that we would get to the Rock island rapids first and get one of the good pilots first.

When we backed the steamer Golden Gate away from that raft and went through the draw of the bridge to get to the raft below the bridge we met one of these two boats

coming up the river after her second half of her raft. While passing each other the boat going up yelled out, 'Go on hog.'

We heard a big-lunged fellow on our boat yell out, 'Go on old snail. When we get to the rapids, we will tell the rapids pilots you are coming.'

We got to the rapids the next evening before midnight and found a raft lying there to go in the morning with Dorance as pilot and (double trip), Rambo and his boat took us (double trip), and the other two boats that we passed at Dubuque had to wait twenty-four hours before they could get these pilots.

*From: Captain J.M Turner, "Rafting on the Mississippi," Wisconsin Magazine of History, 24 (September 1940), pp. 59-62.*