

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Steamboat once was popular way to get to Oshkosh

Badger History magazine ran a story in 1961 written by Ripon's Margaret Bonnell (1885-1979). The year before, Bonnell had read articles about steam boating on the Fox River in both *Badger History* and *The Thirtieth Star*.

From this she wrote a letter to *Badger History* about the excursions she had on the steamboat "Thistle" out of Berlin around 1904. The magazine requested that she write an article, which was published in November 1961.

Badger History magazine was first published in 1947 by the Wisconsin Historical Society and was printed until 1980. It endeavored to introduce both elementary and middle school children and their teachers to Wisconsin history and was only published during the school year.

Bonnell, a public school teacher, had received *Badger History* since the magazine's inception.

In June 1904, Bonnell graduated from Ripon High School and won a violin scholarship to attend Ripon College. Playing music at a friend's wedding, she met Elsie Smith Buttrick (1886-1982), a young teacher from nearby Berlin. During her trips down the Fox River out of Berlin, Bonnell traveled and stayed with Buttrick.

Part of the *Badger History* article is reprinted here.

"Some progressive merchants in Oshkosh started running a weekly steamboat excursion on the Fox River. Every Tuesday the Thistle picked up crowds of people at Berlin, Eureka, Omro and Winneconne and took them to Oshkosh and back. The boat trip began early in the morning and lasted until after dark, and the total excursion fare was only 10 cents! (Approximately \$3.60 today.)

"I lived in Ripon, which is

not on the river, but Berlin — only 12 miles north — is on the Fox. The Thistle left Berlin at 7 a.m. and didn't get back until 9 p.m. so I had to go to Berlin on Monday night by train and stay there also on Tuesday night.

We got up early Tuesday morning, had breakfast and packed enough lunch in shoeboxes for dinner and supper. Then we hustled down to Steadman's dock to get a good seat on the boat — preferably near the railing — and be ready to leave at 7 o'clock sharp.

"On a Wisconsin map you'll see that it isn't far from Berlin to Oshkosh as the crow flies, but the Fox River is a crooked, winding stream, full of interesting bends and

kinks, and they afforded new thrills at every turn. So, we covered a lot of mileage and enjoyed a nice scenic trip, all for a dime.

"The first little town we passed through was Eureka, and that was very interesting as we had to go through the Eureka locks. They were the first locks I ever saw, and I learned then and there how they worked to raise or lower the level of the water.

At other towns along the way it was fun to see and wave at the big crowds gathered at every pier. Some were there to get on the boat, but many others just came to look.

"At Butte des Morts the Fox River widens and forms lovely Lake Butte des Morts. We knew then we were not far from Oshkosh, which we unusually reached just about noon. Having eaten our dinners earlier (water trips make people hungry) we scampered off the boat in a hurry, eager to get downtown to the stores not far away.

"Our first and favorite bargain places were the 10-cent stores, and one I remember es-



THIS TURN-OF-the-century postcard provided by the Berlin Area Historical Society shows people looking at the Thistle steamboat in Berlin. *Berlin Area Historical Society photo*

pecially was run by the Church brothers. There we could get the prettiest little plates I've seen for only ten cents — such thin and dainty little things. ...

"The time in Oshkosh went all too fast and by 3:30 in the afternoon we had to hurry back to the boat which left at 4 o'clock.

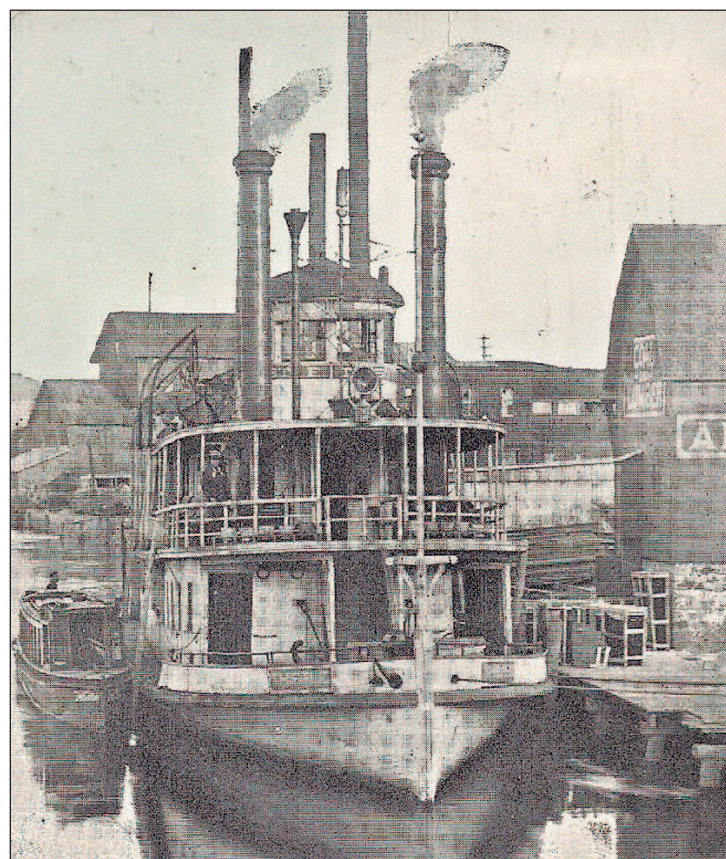
"All of us seemed quieter on the return trip, but I remember how much fun it was to sit in circles with our friends, telling stories and jokes and just chatting. But the part I enjoyed most of all was singing the popular songs of that day and some of the older ones, too.

"I've had wonderful trips on big steamers since then — on the Mississippi, the St. Lawrence and on the Great Lakes. But none ever gave me such pleasure as those old Thistle steamer trips on the Fox River."

Steamboats were common on the Fox River and Wolf River in the mid 1800s until around 1920. In northeastern Wisconsin, steamboats moved both goods and people on the Fox River from Portage north to Oshkosh and also up the Wolf River to Green Bay and beyond. The rivers would be dredged to make it possible for the boats to easily travel the waterways.

By the 1920s, roads, cars and trucks had improved enough to travel longer distances. They were able to carry goods and people much faster than travel on the winding rivers. Steamboats fell out of favor and the rivers no longer were dredged.

The Thistle was a stern-wheeler built in Oshkosh in 1894 and originally named the "J.H. Crawford." The boat was



THIS 1907 PHOTOGRAPH shows the Thistle steamboat at Steadman's dock in Berlin which was located on the eastern side of the Fox River just north of the Huron Street bridge. *Berlin Area Historical Society photo*

renamed "Thistle" in 1899 after being lengthened by 14 feet and having new boilers added. It was abandoned in Green Bay in either 1915 or 1918.

One of the largest intact artifacts of the early steamboats is found in Arthur Marble Park in Winneconne. Sometime in the 1920s, the cabin of a steamboat was pulled ashore on the eastern shore of Lake Butte des Morts near the community of Butte des Morts and turned into a cottage. In the summer of 2001, it was moved by the Win-

neconne Historical Society to its present location and is open to the public as a museum during the summer months.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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