

1840's BOATING
on the
"IMPRACTICABLE" GILA RIVER

by
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*see presentation at the
Arizona Historical Convention
Phoenix, Arizona, 1976*

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The overland migration west in the mid-nineteenth century produced several adjuncts to the normal wagon traffic over the trails - windwagons, handcarts, wheelbarrows and even boats. All of these undertakings were experimental; some were planned in advance, while others confirmed that necessity was the mother of invention coupled with the ingenuity and enterprise of those on the trails. These unusual ventures played a short but interesting episode in the trail lore of the west. None of them is more fascinating than water transport across a great southwestern desert.

The Gila River flowed almost six hundred miles due west through New Mexico. Although an overland trail came to parallel the lower stretch of the river, the Gila itself did not appear a likely prospect for navigation. The small stream ran through a thirsty desert and little more than a hundred miles of it were accessible. Emptying into the Colorado River, the Gila forced anyone who floated it either to look for other means of travel upon disembarking at the western bank of the Colorado or to make provisions for animals and running gear to be brought up to the Colorado. Nevertheless, travelers would attempt to use the Gila in their move west, and in doing so, evidence the lengths to which the emigrant parties and the military would go to cross the southwestern wasteland safely and expeditiously.

The first boating enterprise on the Gila River, except for the Indian and fur trapper, was conducted by the United States military on its way to California during the Mexican War. Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke and his Mormon Battalion were ordered to establish a wagon road from New Mexico's Rio Grande Valley to the Pacific Coast. When the 350 man battalion reached the Gila River near the Pima villages on December 21, 1846, they were, to use their commander's words, "badly off." Partial rations combined with pushing and pulling their wagons had taken its toll on

the men, and their animals were in even worse condition. On Christmas Day, the battalion crossed the bend in the Gila River and discovered this new desert to be the most severe they had experienced thus far. Cooke had lightened his loads by throwing away pack saddles, trading sheepskins to the Indians and caching mule shoes and nails. Yet the procurement of food for men and animals at the Indian villages recreated the transportation problem. His fifteen wagons were almost too much for his worn out mules to transport considering the bad road, and poor grazing. Even so he did not have enough provisions to issue full rations to the men or teams.¹

Finding it impossible to travel near the stream due to heavy sand, gullies and thick brush, the battalion blazed their road quite some distance from the river. He could see little value in the river and called it an "impracticable" stream. Still a commander with a transportation problem who believed each day "was to be an experience or venture" might envision a use for even this river. On December 29th two men, presumably from the battalion, floated the day's travel on a raft down the river without any difficulties. Within thirty-six hours Cooke decided to launch one of his wagon bodies on his "impracticable" river at the next opportunity².

On New Year's Day of 1847 the battalion marched to the river and encamped early. At this point the Gila ran against a steep bluff and looked promising, being clean, three or four feet deep in places, and about one hundred and fifty yards wide. Some eastward bound travelers came up and informed the command that they were about seventy miles from the crossing of the Colorado River. With all variables apparently favorable, work on the wagon-boat began in an expanded form of Cooke's original idea. Two wagon beds were removed from their running gear, chinked with pitch placed end to end, and then lashed together between two dry cottonwood logs. Cooke

believed he had more wagons than he needed, given the condition of his mules, yet he hesitated to abandon government property. To resolve his dilemma, he directed a raft built to convey the running gear of one of the wagon-boats and an entire wagon. Thus the boat and raft would free twenty mules from drawing wagons which Cooke hoped would float the next seventy miles.³

The battalion's assistant quartermaster Lieutenant George Stoneman who claimed experience in boating, was assigned to take charge of the water detachment.⁴ Although the boating venture was a serious affair, Cooke and his men did not forsake their sense of humor which found expression in naval terms - "Commodore Stoneman,"⁵ and his "flotilla"⁶ or "fleet"⁷ - in the daily journals of the battalion. This was pretty heavy talk with tongue in cheek for a cottonwood raft and a makeshift boat in the midst of a vast desert.

The plan for the joint operation of the road building army and the river navy called for the "flotilla" to carry their loads down the river while the main command continued its road making away from the stream. Since the two groups were to camp together on the river each evening, the river detachment carried neither cooking utensils nor blankets. On the morning of January 2nd the battalion loaded its boat with pork and flour for the men, corn for the mules, some excess road building tools and some of Cooke's personal baggage. Assured by Commodore Stoneman that the boat could carry more freight, Cooke put in more flour until the wagon-boat carried approximately 2,500 pounds.⁸ The men in the ranks did not like the idea of foodstuffs being the primary cargo. They had been on partial rations since Santa Fe and viewed the boating venture as risky, possibly further reducing their meager supply.⁹

After the boat was loaded, Cooke delayed the marching column's departure, hoping to see the commencement of his river experiment. The raft still lacked a couple of logs which had been partially prepared the previous day, but had not been brought up to the raft construction site. At 9:30 a.m. Cooke could no longer delay his march and sounded the advance. The battalion marched up a bluff, wound around the foot of a mountain and after traveling some eleven or twelve miles came back to the river again, where they camped early at 3 o'clock. The river did not look promising for transportation here, and guide Pauline Weaver, well acquainted with the Gila, claimed that it was shallower than he had ever seen it. The "fleet" did not come up; all knew why.¹⁰

The details of this first attempt to float the Gila reveal that Stoneman's difficulties began immediately after he embarked at noon. The three or four feet of water at their starting point soon measured in inches. A nightmare of sandbars forced the men to spend as much time in the water as on their crafts. The raft failed to go even a quarter of a mile before it had to be abandoned. Stoneman dispatched one of the raftsmen to report to Cooke while the rest of the crew worked hard and managed to move the wagon-boat a couple of miles further with its full load. In the meantime the raftsman messenger reached Cooke and reported the troubles encountered by the river detachment. Cooke immediately dispatched him back to the boaters with a note advising Stoneman of mules being left to lighten the boat's load. Stoneman sent the messenger back to Cooke with the information that the boaters would either reach the mules or get them to the boat, and after reducing the load they would either get the boat down to the mouth of the Gila or overtake the battalion.¹¹

The process of lightening the boat's load began with the unloading of tools, corn and pork onto sandbars and the river bank. Still the boat was too low in the water, so the precious flour had to be left in two drops. Thus, the whole load in the boat was left ashore within the first four or five miles. When night fell the boat was less than halfway to the rendezvous point with the battalion, forcing Stoneman and his two companions to secure their craft and camp without tents, bedrolls, cooking utensils and the security of a large command.¹²

Even without the load Stoneman wanted to take the boat down the Gila. Since the two beds, serving as separate boats, were lighter and easier to handle, they were detached from the cottonwood logs. Now the boaters began to make some headway. Meanwhile, upon seeing the river at the next two encampments, Cooke realized the boat could not carry a full load. Twice he left pack mules to bring up some of the flour to the battalion, yet neither of the two pack mules contingents made contact with the boaters due to a misunderstanding of signals and the nearly impenetrable thickets along the river's edge. Learning from the raftsman messenger of Stoneman's determination to float the Gila and unable to make contact with the boaters, Cooke became anxious for the safety, primarily from Indian ambushes, of the three detached men.¹³

For these three days Cooke had made short marches, the last one only five miles, in hopes that his boaters would catch up. No longer able to tolerate further delay and concerned about the growing scarcity of food for men and animals, Cooke decided to order Stoneman to abandon everything but 500 pounds of flour and the best wagon bed, and if necessary even these. On January 5th the battalion's interpreter Dr. Stephen C. Foster, guide Appolonius and a party consisting of a Corporal, five men and six pack mules

followed the road back to the previous day's campsite five miles east. Foster and Appolonius left the road and after working their way up the river a few miles ran into Stoneman and his crew with two empty boats. Stoneman estimated they had left their load some twenty miles above the place where the pack mules waited. Even floating the empty boats had not been easy, but they were now beginning to catch up with the command. Stoneman and his two companions continued down the river in their boats. Foster and Appolonius returned to the party with the pack mules, telling them where the flour had been deposited but leaving the decision of whether to go after it to the corporal. The packers went up the river after the flour.¹⁴

When Foster returned to report the complete failure of the boating venture with the loss of provisions, Cooke sarcastically wrote in his daily journal - "Mr. Stoneman is still boating," and acrimoniously criticized the "commodore" for making such positive assurances before stating that Cooke had added additional flour to the boat's cargo. He contended that if the boat and raft had departed early as he had wished, he would have seen the failure of the experiment and called it off at once preventing the loss of provisions, time and energy.¹⁵ Nevertheless Cooke was perfectly willing to share any blame for the failure of the boating venture and for the impact it might have on the battalion's mission.

On January 6th Cooke moved his command twelve miles and camped again on the river, where he finally rendezvoused with his boaters. Stoneman reported his experiences explaining that in many places the water did not exceed three or four inches in depth. Further explanation was not necessary. The reading of the Gila in almost any January would tell the same story, boding ill to any boating venture. Stoneman left the boating while several privates floated the crafts down river for the next two days where on

January 8th the battalion camped for the last time on the Gila near its junction with the Colorado River. The boats had traveled some seventy miles in seven days but without a load for almost ninety-five per cent of the trip. The two boats saw their last service to the battalion when they were used to ferry the battalion across the Colorado River.¹⁶

All knew the boating experiment had failed, delayed the marching column and been more trouble than it was worth. Nevertheless, they had acquired a better knowledge of the Gila River, knowledge which unfortunately would not be readily available to other travelers along this river for several years.

The discovery of gold in California produced a rush to the new El Dorado with thousands journeying along the Gila Trail. Among these Forty-Niners were two companies who like Cooke experienced boating on the "impracticable" river. The first group which started in Texas in mid-April of 1849, was led by Lewis Birdsall Harris, whose preparatory work included building a wagon-boat.¹⁷ It was designed to serve as a wagon on land and when removed from its running gear to be water ready. A companion of Harris described it thus: "the bed or body of the wagon was built in the shape of a scow-boat - both ends turned up and constructed so as to be water tight. Oars were carried on the side."¹⁸ Harris painted his wagon-boat green and loaded it with a good supply of provisions and trade goods.

The Harris party, which included his wife, his two negro slaves and two friends, joined a larger company in Fredericksburg, Texas and started for California. At the Pecos River they initiated the boat and found it worked well in ferrying everything over the "deep, narrow, swift and muddy stream."¹⁹ The company moved on to El Paso where they dissolved, experiencing the disunity common to many of the overland companies.

Fortunately, within two weeks, a new company was formed which upon moving north some sixty miles to the crossing of the Rio Grande near Dona Ana, the wagon-boat again saw ferry service. After spending a month by the river, they continued west traveling over Guadalupe Pass, through Tucson and on to the Gila River.²⁰

In early September they found the river to be swift, deep and muddy due to the annual late summer rains of the desert southwest. After trading at the Indian villages for food, the company moved westward to a point below the Gila's bend. Here the river was about two hundred and fifty feet wide, four feet deep and running muddy. September was definitely a more auspicious time than January to try boating down the Gila. Nonetheless, the wagon-boat remained on its wheels and rolled down to the Colorado River where it was used for the third time to ferry a river.²¹

It is unclear whether Harris planned to use his craft solely to cross rivers, or whether he had considered its use in floating down the Gila. After arriving in California, Harris wrote: "We expected to have to leave our waggons (sic) and everything else on the road."²² This Texas based anticipation suggests that Harris had more in mind for his wagon-boat than merely crossing the Pecos, Rio Grande and Colorado rivers. Before starting west his only route information had been a copy of Lieutenant William H. Emory's map and notes of his 1846 trip to California with General Kearny. If one assumed they would follow Kearny's trail, then Emory's account of the difficulties on the upper Gila River made the abandonment of wheeled vehicles almost certain. Unless the wagon-boat was built for such a contingency, its construction seems foolish.²³ Harris, however, did not keep to the planned route. Instead of striking for the headwaters of the

Gila, he followed Cooke's Wagon Road, turning the abandonment of wagons from a certainty to a choice.

Probably the crucial element in not using the boat to float down the Gila was the excellent condition of the party, both men and animals. The slow pace of travel and the abundant provisions, augmented by jerked beef from the wild cattle country near the San Bernardino and peach cobbler made from the fruit of abandoned orchards in the Santa Cruz Valley, caused Harris to correctly claim, "There has been no one on the road however, who has got along better, if as well as we."²⁴ In short there was nothing to be gained by using the boat on the river.

Harris' wagon-boat was launched in the water for the last time on October 12th at the Colorado River just short of six months from commencing their trek to the gold fields. Here they ferried their own company, a second company of Forty-niners, and a Mexican party which paid sixty dollars for the service.²⁵ A company of United States Dragoons under Lieutenant Cave Johnson Coutts had viewed the ferrying service from the west side of the river. Coutts was so impressed that he offered Harris seventy-five dollars for the wagon-boat but with no replacement wagon bed available, necessity required that the wagon-boat roll farther west into California to complete its journey.²⁶

A second company of Forty-Niners, the Peoria Company, also became associated with boating on the Gila. Their journey to Santa Fe and down the Rio Grande was uneventful. However, by the time they reached the end of Guadalupe Pass in southeastern Arizona, they were forced to take eight or ten oxen and hoist both wagons and teams up a steep embankment due to the weakened condition of their animals. The company found the going even more difficult

after leaving Tucson. The seventy to eighty miles of barren waste between this settlement and the Gila River took a heavy toll on their animals.²⁷

Charles E. Pancoast, a Quaker member of the company, thought the Gila resembled the Missouri River, as it was spread out but with less volume. The now yellow-tinted Gila had a rapid current mingled with mud and sand. They were two or three weeks behind the Harris party and their description would indicate a somewhat receded water level. During the crossing of the Gila's bend they lost a number of oxen which forced them to abandon a wagon and to "depend upon the Charity of others to carry their Provisions." Most of their animals were now "mere Skeletons," and the few spears of grass yielded by the severe desert promised little relief. Obviously they could not continue without a major change. After some discussion, they decided to build two large rafts after the fashion of Arkansas River ferryboats.²⁸

In the morning they began looking for building materials, but some with better teams than the rest now openly opposed the raft idea. In the afternoon a wagon with several men traveled a quarter of a mile out on the plain and put up a tent, and began Arizona's first Masonic meeting. The next morning the Masons along with twelve of the most fit teams, including the captain of the company, started down the trail. The remaining "Crippled Ducks" included those without transportation, a woman in advanced pregnancy, and others not able to adequately fend for themselves. This division caused two men to set out on foot with eighty pound packs on their backs and caused the others to consider rafting even more seriously.²⁹

The forcibly reorganized company proceeded to build the two rafts. Building materials included the recently abandoned wagon and one board stripped from the bottom and two from each side of the good wagons. In five days they

built two rafts complete with oars, ropes and stone anchors. A small enclosure was added to one of the rafts to shelter the pregnant woman. They went through their loads making a three-way division--what would remain in the wagons, what would be transported on the rafts, and lastly which "indispensable items" would be thrown away. When packed and ready, the boats and wagons moved off on their separate routes only to rejoin at the crossing of the Colorado River.³⁰

The rafters found the river current rapid but shallow and full of bottom scouring sandbars. On the third day of floating, the woman began to experience labor pains, necessitating a stop to deliver a baby girl. The journey resumed the following morning. The makeshift rafts floated down to the mouth of the Gila, swept into the larger Colorado River and floated down to its wagon crossing point, arriving six days ahead of the land caravan.³¹

The two rafts had successfully traversed over a hundred miles of the Gila River. Now the crafts were of little value except to someone wanting to use them to operate a ferry on the Colorado. Lieutenant Coutts, who two weeks earlier had tried to buy the Harris wagon-boat, purchased one of the rafts and put it into ferrying service.³² These California bound emigrants now ashore were extremely fortunate to have friends coming overland to carry them on to their destination.

The land party arrived after a much more difficult journey. They were thrilled with the newest member of their reunited company and persuaded the parents to name the baby girl "Gila," appropriate in more ways than one as the youngster was probably the first American child born in Arizona. The company placed the cargo from the rafts into the wagons and moved on to the golden land.³³

The boating venture attempted by this group had proven beneficial to them. Their difficulties were minor in comparison to those of the land party, the trip was faster, and the goods they floated meant less for their weakened animals to pull. Of equal interest is their success in light of Cooke's failure. Unlike Cooke this company spent a full five days constructing their crafts from scratch, and although their building materials were not the best, the rafts had the potential of being better. However, their biggest advantages were that they tried to carry less weight and they had more water.

Pancoast's success did not result in a proliferation of similar ventures. Floating down the river was too iffy, too dependent upon the water flow, the suitability of the craft, the load and, most importantly, finding a means of continuing the trip upon reaching the western bank of the Colorado. Even during the auspicious months of the southwest's monsoon rains, floating down the river was a last resort. Since little more than a hundred miles of the Gila could be floated, it generally was not worth the trouble to build a raft. To seek out the best road to travel, carry feed, pick mesquite beans for the animals, rest teams, and move at night meant to have a measure of control over the fate of the journey. Such were neither practical nor possible on the river. The Gila would control those who floated upon it and determine their destinies. The river was not wholly "impracticable" yet the portrait painted by these three companies suggest that the route to California did not lay between the sandy banks of the Gila.

Footnotes

¹Philip St. George Cooke, "Journal of the March of the Mormon Battalion, 1846-47," reproduced in Ralph P. Bieber and Averm B. Bender (eds.) Exploring Southwestern Trails 1846-54 (in Southwest Historical Series, Vol. VII Glendale, Calif., 1938), 166, 168-178, 180, 184. Hereafter cited as Cooke's Journal.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 179, 181, 185-189, 195. Philip St. George Cooke, "Report on the March of the Mormon Battalion, February 5, 1847," House Executive Documents No. 41, 30th Congress 1st Session, 558.

⁴Cooke's Journal, 68, 187.

⁵David B. Gracy and Helen J. H. Rugeley, "From the Mississipie to the Pacific: An Englishman in the Mormon Battalion," Arizona and the West VII (Summer, 1965), 153.

⁶Cooke's Journal, 188.

⁷Guy M. Keysor Journal (ms. in the Utah State Historical Society files) January 2 and 3, 1847.

⁸Cooke's Journal, 188, 195.

⁹Henry W. Bigler, "Extracts from the Journal of Henry W. Bigler," Utah Historical Quarterly V (April, 1933), 52. Daniel Tyler, A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War (Salt Lake City, 1881 and reprint), 239.

¹⁰Cooke's Journal, 188, 189. Keysor Journal, January 2, 1847.

¹¹Cooke's Journal, 189-193.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 194, 226, 227.

¹⁵Ibid., 195-197

¹⁶Ibid., 196-202

¹⁷Letter of Lewis Birdsall Harris to his brother Clinton, June 16, 1850. (All Harris correspondence in the Manuscript Collection of the California State Library).

¹⁸"Reminiscence of C. C. Cox," Southwestern Historical Quarterly VI (Oct. 1902), 131.

¹⁹Maybelle Eppard Martin (ed.), "From Texas to California in 1849: Diary of C. C. Cox," Southwestern Historical Quarterly XXIX (July, 1925), 27, 28, 46.

²⁰Martin, "From Texas to California....", Southwestern Historical Quarterly XXIX (October, 1925), 129-135, 142-144.

²¹Ibid, 144-146.

²²Letter of Lewis Birdsall Harris to his brother Clinton, March 4, 1850.

²³For some insight into Harris's earlier career, see "Journal of Lewis Birdsall Harris, 1836-1842," Southwestern Historical Quarterly XXV (January, 1922), 185-197.

²⁴Letter of Lewis Birdsall Harris to his brother Clinton, October 21, 1849.

²⁵Ibid., 204. John W. Audubon, Audubon's Western Journal 1849-1850, (Cleveland, 1906), 163.

²⁶Letter of Lewis B. Harris to his brother Clinton, October 21, 1849.

²⁷Anna Paschall Hannum (ed.) A Quaker Forty-Niner: The Adventures of Charles Edward Pancoast (Philadelphia, 1930), 231, 232, 242, 243.

²⁸Ibid., 242, 243, 248, 249.

²⁹Ibid., 249.

³⁰Ibid., 249, 250. Pancoast has them starting their boat and wagon journey on November 5, however, Lt. Coutts had the boating party arriving on October 30. The latter date is almost assuredly the correct one as Coutts kept a daily journal while Pancoast recalled his trip years after it occurred.

³¹Ibid., 250, 251.

³²Hubert H. Bancroft, History of Arizona and New Mexico (San Francisco, 1889), 487.

³³Hannum, A Quaker Forty-Niner..., 251. The family name of the proud parents of Gila was probably Howard.