

A page out of Aitkin's riverboat heritage returns from a watery grave



The Andy Gibson pictured as a dredge vessel used to help keep the Upper Mississippi navigable. She once carried 100 tons of cargo, 150 passengers, and many memories from Aitkin to Grand Rapids, plus participated in "The Great River Race of 1885."

PHOTO COURTESY OF AITKIN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CONNIE PETTERSEN
The past and present have merged – in the Mississippi River, west of Aitkin. The remnants of an old riverboat can again be seen in the receding water. The skeletal hull of the Andy Gibson appears only in dry years. The last time this old sternwheeler was visible was in 1998.

Today the Gibson looks like a picked-over Thanksgiving turkey, not the fine lady of her glory days in the 1880s. Usually submerged and preserved by cold river water, her ghostly ribs remain

tied to scraps of old Potter's Landing.

Some reports say the Gibson burned at the pier. Aitkin County Historical Society records say the Gibson was purchased before her demise by the Potter Company in 1891, retired in 1892, dismantled and sunk at Potter's Landing. Whether or not the Gibson burned after being abandoned is not clear, but odds are she probably was set on fire, because a sunken boat of that size could snag other watercraft.

Aitkin originated as a prime

Mississippi riverboat town. In the 1870s, three Tibbets brothers, surveyors for the Northern Pacific Railroad, reported the area perfect to ship supplies upriver to feed northern Minnesota piney woods camps. It was also accessible from Duluth by rail.

As Aitkin grew, it became a valuable Mississippi port. The development of northern Minnesota is partly due to Aitkin's thriving steamboat industry, since it provided a means for supplies and lumber workers, plus



The remnants of the Andy Gibson, still attached to the pier at Potter's Landing. She became a victim of the river she served until 1892. The last time the Andy Gibson was visible was in 1998, and records from Cross Lake area Corps of Engineers' confirm that water levels nose-dived late August and September that year. Another sighting occurred in the dry summer of 1977 and again the Gibson was visible during the drought of 1988. Recent readings from the Corps show the 2006 drought has already receded Mississippi waters to levels lower than the drought of 1988.

CONNIE PETTERSEN PHOTO

immigrants to settle lands. Aitkin businessmen, seeking a more northern stash to supply lumber camps, founded "the Rapids" later becoming Grand Rapids.

The mighty Mississippi narrows considerably north of St. Paul. Sharp bends and deadly sandbars make it unnavigable to large riverboats. Smaller vessels were needed for the upper Mississippi. They differed from their larger, southern cousins operating out of New Orleans that resembled fancy floating hotels with stylish southern belles, riverboat gamblers and saloon girls.

Upper Mississippi stern-wheelers were frugal, and accommodations basic. They were designed to carry settlers, loggers and freight during the 1870s to the 1890s, the peak of northern Minnesota's lumber industry.

The largest steamer on the Upper Mississippi was the Andy Gibson. Others included The City of Aitkin,

Pokegama, White Swan, Fawn, George Houghton, Swan, Walter Taylor, Irene, Remnica, Oriole, and the Lee. Gibson's captains included Fred Bonness, Lee West, John Steason and John Lyon, all taking a turn at her helm.

Riverboat captains were interesting, colorful characters. C.C. Sutton of the Fawn was a doctor and minister. Communities or individuals used signal flags to hail a passing riverboat. For Sutton, instead of just stopping for freight or passengers, his services were sometimes requested as a doctor or to perform a wedding or funeral.

During floods or fires, riverboats helped evacuate people and locate drowning victims. Joyfully anticipated at every village or landing, they brought mail, outside news and material goods. Companies vied for business, and captains competed against each other. It was a status symbol to beat the record of another vessel.

One historic duel, "The Great River Race of 1885," occurred between Fawn's Captain Sutton and Gibson's Captain Bonness. In the 1971 Aitkin Centennial book, Dorothy Lindquist, a writer for the *Aitkin Independent Age*, wrote an article entitled "Andy Gibson, Mississippi Mischief Maker." Lindquist credits historical data to a September 5, 1885 *Aitkin Age* story.

"If steamboats could smile, the steam-wheeler Andy Gibson would be grinning these days from port to starboard," began Lindquist's centennial article. "Constructed during the winter of 1883 by Lowell, West and Bonness, she slipped slowly, all 130 feet of her, down into the Ole Missisip in the spring of '84 with a brand new 32-foot beam and a built-in sense of humor.

"Her adventures, misadventures and mischief are documented history in the

(continued p. 9)

All About Dogs Grooming

"Warm Hearts for Cold Noses"
Janine Williams - Owner

- No Restraints Used
- Reasonable Pricing
- 13 Years In The Business
- Grooming With A Personalized Touch

Saturday Appointments Available

North Of Ossipee On 118
Merrifield..... 218-765-3660

MERCURY SCRATCH & DENT PONTOON SALE
#1 On The Water

400 PONTOONS IN STOCK with 8 different brands! Factory direct sales with the lowest prices in the United States. Many of these are non-current or slight scratches.

19' Standard Forester \$3,995	18' Forester Angler w/25 HP \$7,495
14' Forester w/9.8 HP Motor & Trailer \$7,995	21' Deluxe Pleasure Island \$5,995
16' Forester w/ 9.8 HP Motor \$6,795	21' Fish & Cruise w/40 HP \$8,995
19' Forester Fish w/25 HP \$7,495	NEW! Top of the line Repossessed 24' Playbouy w/40 HP Mercury w/o 40 HP Mercury \$11,999 \$7,995

T & M Marine - Grand Rapids MN
1-800-356-1322 • www.tandmmarine.com *Open Sunday 10-2*

SEAMLESS RAIN GUTTERS

Available in... ALUMINUM • PVC COATED ALUMINUM • COPPER

NO Seams - NO Leaks

CALL: **218-768-4231** TERRY BOYES INSURED & BONDED
218-839-9728

GRAND MARKET Grocery
Fri.-Thurs., 8/18 - 8/24
Full Service Grocery
Onamia, next to Grand Casino
Daily 8 a.m. - 10 p.m. 320-532-4055
We accept WIC, EBT, Discover, Visa & MC

Tender Lean, Boneless Center Cut Family Pack Pork Chopslb. 2¹⁹	12 oz. cans, 24 Pack PEPSI Products..... 5⁹⁹	17.6 - 20 oz. Smacks or Raisin Bran Kellogg's Cereal 2/4⁹⁹
Whole, Boneless Pork Loin lb. 1⁹⁹	12 Pack, 12 oz. cans Mug Root Beer & Sierra Mist ... 1⁹⁹	Our Family 6 Count Ice Cream Sandwiches 2/2²⁹
Family Pack - Not less than 85% Lean Ground Beef lb. 1⁵⁹	24 Pack, 1/2 Liter Bottled Water Aquafina 5²⁹	Red Delicious Apples lb. 59¢
John Morrell - Assorted Var. Bacon 1 lb. pkgs. 3/6⁹⁹	Deli - Individual 2-Piece Chicken Meal, Potatoes & Side Salad Chicken Meal 3⁸⁹	Minnesota Grown Sweet Corn 4/1⁰⁰
Many more in-store specials!	Deli - Smoked Turkey Breast lb. 3²⁹	California - Red or Green Seedless Grapeslb. 1¹⁹
	Deli - Colby Jack Cheeselb. 2¹⁹	

The Andy Gibson sighted again

(continued from p. 8)

brittle pages of the old *Aitkin Age* and *Aitkin Independent*, pioneer newspapers of her era. Following an extended retirement at the bottom of the river for approximately three-quarters of a century, her career continues, her adventures still recorded.

“ . . . The Andy Gibson was a working boat. She drew two feet of water with a full cargo and later, when her length was extended to 140 feet, she carried 100 tons of freight plus 150 passengers . . . Her captain and builder, Fred Bonness, knew her quirks and fancies. John Lyon, her pilot during much of her career, coaxed her gently and gracefully around the more difficult oxbow bends in the river, which she negotiated in a most ladylike fashion.

“There were times, however, when she would kick up her petticoats in a lacy white spray, spin the river curve, leaving marks of passing on the riverbank as she turned. The Andy Gibson was independent. Her captain called her clumsy, but she soon fixed him.

“With Captain Bonness at her wheel the Gibson passed a difficult point in the river and snubbed her nose on a sand bar, running aground. Before the good captain had a notion of her intentions, his

lady had swung around and steamed off back up river.”

Lindquist said the Gibson sought revenge for the captain’s remark. Competition was “keen” between the 140-foot Gibson and the 85-foot Fawn. They attempted to “best each other to Grand Rapids,” a one-way river distance of about 175 miles that usually took four days.

In June 1885, the Fawn cut her time to 51 hours and, a week later, shortened it to 46. On July 2, the Gibson, piloted by Fred Bonness was 18 feet wider and 55 feet longer. She gave her best effort of 37 hours and Bonness never called her clumsy again. However, the lighter Fawn had a final record of 36 hours, which was never surpassed. “The Gibson was a graceful loser,” said Lindquist, “perhaps for her size, she knew she was the true winner.”

Used mostly for passenger/cargo voyages from Aitkin to Grand Rapids during favorable water conditions (no snags, sandbars or logjams), the Gibson was also known for group picnics, moonlight excursions and dancing on deck for a fee of 50 cents.

The Gibson negotiated the Mississippi’s sharp bends with an occasional clipping of the riverbank. These gouges sometimes washed out to the extent that the U.S.

Army engineers eventually condemned the Gibson.

By then, railroads were becoming a prime means of shipping, as well as transportation, and riverboats were becoming outdated. After the Potter Company purchased the Gibson, it was used for logging operations. Before her demise, the Army Corps of Engineers used her for “snagging” and a dredge vessel, keeping the Mississippi navigable between Grand Rapids and Aitkin.

In 1892, the Gibson’s boiler went to Potter’s store in Aitkin. By January 1905, the balance of her equipment was removed and parts sent to Bena, Minnesota to be used in a log-hauling boat on Lake Winnibigoshish.

A hundred and fourteen years later, the ghostly remains of a riverboat lady, the Andy Gibson, makes her mischievous appearance again. Perhaps she still asserts her independence by refusing to deteriorate in her watery grave at Potter’s Landing. Her hull, filled with river sludge and embedded in Mississippi mud, is about the only good thing the drought of 2006 has produced.

(To preserve the past for future generations, please observe the “look but do not take anything but photographs” attitude if you see the Andy Gibson.)

Aitkin sisters have ties to the Andy Gibson

Maxine Schroeder (pictured) and sister, Patty Wanous, of Aitkin have family ties to the Andy Gibson. Their great-grandfather was Commodore Edwin B. Lowell, one of three men who built the Gibson. Their Schroeder family history says the Andy Gibson was deliberately burned at Potter’s Landing after removing everything of value.

“E.B. Lowell, my great-grandfather, came to Minnesota in 1855 as a woodsman,” said Schroeder, “He married Annie Haugen in Minneapolis in 1878. One of their five children, Emma Lowell, was my grandmother.”

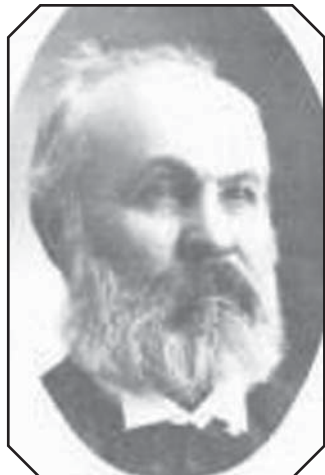
E. B. Lowell remained in the Aitkin area and is buried at Lakeview Cemetery. The following excerpt is from his newspaper obituary:

“(E.B.) Lowell came to Minnesota to grow up with the country. He followed the occupation of a woodsman, and when the Civil War broke out, was one of the first to offer his services to his country, enlisting in the famed First Minnesota, taking part in most of the engagements of that regiment including Gettysburg. In 1865 Lowell came to Aitkin Co. to engage in the logging business with J.W. Wakefield. In 1880 he formed a partnership with Lee West, and with him carried on an extensive logging business for several years.

In 1882 they added steamboating to their business, building the Andy Gibson, a large steamer, to carry freight between Aitkin and Grand Rapids, and in the following year purchased the Fawn, a smaller boat, the ‘Andy’ being unable to handle the traffic. It was at this time that his friends conferred on him the title of ‘Commodore.’

He was chairman of the board of county commissioners when, with Warren Potter and L. G. Seavey as his associates, and the late D. J. Knox as county auditor, the first county road was laid out and constructed to Mille Lacs. He served several terms on the village council, and for ten years was president of the board of education, during the last term of which, the magnificent \$40,000 (yellow brick) school house was built.”

Maxine Schroeder is not sure if her great-grandfather physically helped construct the Andy Gibson but, as one of the financiers and an accomplished woodsman, she thinks is quite likely he pounded a few nails.



“Commodore” Edwin B. Lowell, pioneer citizen of Aitkin and one of the builders of the Andy Gibson.

Stop Lint from Plugging Septic Systems, Sewer Pipes and Drains

This patented, re-usable filter captures laundry lint and non-biodegradable fibers from washing machine discharge water and prevents drains, sewer pipes and septic systems from getting plugged with those fibers.

- Easy to use
- Easy to clean
- Fits all types of washing machines

A must for every home owner. Don't do laundry without it!

For more information call **Jim Blakesley**

Appliance Service & Repair
Aitkin
218-927-2027
1-888-450-8845

\$0 *CASH DOWN Delivers

100% FINANCING AVAILABLE **All Applications Accepted** **\$49 DOWN PAYMENTS SALE**

New Chance Finance

Millions of dollars have been allocated to lend to all who want to take advantage of this opportunity to rebuild their credit by financing any automobile of their choice.

We have lenders that want to HELP! • Been told NO before? Here we say YES!

Over 500 vehicles to choose from!

Cars, Trucks, SUVs, 4x4s, Pickups, Convertibles, 2 doors, 4 doors, Ext. Cabs, Crew Cabs, 1 tons, 3/4 tons,

Anything you want - We've got it or we'll get it
New or used

NO MATTER WHAT YOUR CREDIT, GIVE US A CALL! YOU'LL BE GLAD YOU DID!

OVER THE PHONE CREDIT APPROVAL
Elk River FORD; Hwy 10 Elk River, MN
800-862-7754

CARS • CARS • OVER 200 USED CARS • CARS • CARS

95 Lincoln Towncar	\$2,998 or \$133.45/Mo.	02 Dodge Stratus.....	\$6,998 or \$128.76/Mo.
95 Ford Taurus, 39k Act mi.	\$4,998 or \$127.86/Mo.	02 Dodge Neon ES.....	\$6,998 or \$114.55/Mo.
97 Chev Lumina, 4dr., 45K mi.	\$5,488 or \$168.12/Mo.	01 Ford Taurus.....	\$7,998 or \$154.63/Mo.
01 Chev Cavalier.....	\$5,788 or \$117.42/Mo.	01 Dodge Intrepid.....	\$7,998 or \$154.63/Mo.
02 Saturn, 4dr.	\$5,998 or \$121.56/Mo.	02 Pontiac Gand Prix.....	\$7,998 or \$164.93/Mo.
99 Pontiac Grand Am.	\$5,998 or \$138.76/Mo.	02 Chrysler Sebring.....	\$7,998 or \$164.93/Mo.
00 Dodge Neon, 4dr.	\$6,998 or \$121.43/Mo.	02 Pontiac Grand Am.....	\$8,998 or \$178.94/Mo.
01 Chev Cavalier, 2dr.	\$6,998 or \$139.76/Mo.	04 Dodge Neon, 4dr.	\$9,998 or \$169.97/Mo.
00 Ford Focus, ZTS	\$6,998 or \$128.76/Mo.	02 Dodge Intrepid.....	\$9,998 or \$186.91/Mo.
01 Pontiac Grand Am.....	\$6,998 or \$128.76/Mo.		

VANS • VANS • OVER 200 USED VANS • VANS • VANS

97 Dodge Caravan, 7 pass.....	\$3,798 or \$116.46/Mo.	97 Dodge 1/2 T, Carago Van.....	\$5,998 or \$137.60/Mo.
97 Mercury Villager, 7 pass.....	\$4,998 or \$128.41/Mo.	00 Chev Astro, 7 pass	\$6,998 or \$129.78/Mo.
98 Dodge Grand Caravan.....	\$5,488 or \$141.29/Mo.	99 Plymouth Voyager.....	\$6,998 or \$163.18/Mo.
00 Ford Windstar, 7 pass., Loaded.....	\$5,998 or \$119.84/Mo.	00 Ford Windstar.....	\$7,998 or \$158.25/Mo.

TRUCKS • OVER 200 USED TRUCKS • TRUCKS

97 Ford F150 Ext. Cab 4x4.....	\$6,998 or \$164.89/Mo.	01 Ford F150 Quad Cab 4x4.....	\$15,998 or \$328.71/Mo.
99 Ford Ranger Ext. Cab 4x4.....	\$8,998 or \$168.94/Mo.	97 Ford F350 Ext. Cab 4x4 dsl.....	\$16,998 or Low Payments
00 Ford F150 Ext. Cab.....	\$8,998 or \$176.28/Mo.	02 Chevy 1/2 T, Ext. Cab 4x4.....	\$18,998 or \$321.86/Mo.
99 Chevy Ext. Cab 3/4 T 4x4.....	\$10,998 or Low Payments	02 Chevy Ext. Cab 4x4.....	\$19,998 or \$319.40/Mo.
98 Dodge Ext. Cab 4x4	\$10,998 or \$211.47/Mo.		

SUVS • OVER 200 USED SUVS • SUVS

97 Ford Bronco 4x4.....	\$4,998 or \$157.11/Mo.	99 Dodge Durango.....	\$8,998 or \$186.93/Mo.
00 Ford Explorer X.....	\$7,998 or \$169.20/Mo.	00 Dodge Durango.....	\$10,998 or \$214.88/Mo.
97 Chev Tahoe 4x4 L.....	\$7,998 or Low Payments	01 Ford Explorer 4x4.....	\$10,998 or \$196.84/Mo.