



Westward Expansion-Shrinking Time

By Gary Leabman aka "Steamboat Bill"
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Many of us in modern day Hermann had ancestors who came from Europe during the massive immigration to the New World in the 19th century. First they had to be brave enough to get on a sailing ship (or, after 1838, a steamship) to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Often the crossing took up to two months with a 20-30% mortality rate due to crowded conditions, inadequate nutrition, and disease. Children under eight were the most vulnerable. In fact, my own grandparents lost their two youngest children on the crossing.

Most of the German Settlement Society of Philadelphia members coming to Hermann would probably have come to America on sailing ships, then eventually to Hermann by steamboats along the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri Rivers. Later settlers would sail to New Orleans, then by steamboat to Hermann.

By the time the first German settlers arrived here from Philadelphia in 1837, they might have spent 2 weeks on the inland waterways, but that was a vast improvement in comfort and time from what earlier travelers, the pioneers, had experienced. The pioneers headed west in covered wagons, often with tools and provisions purchased from Henry Shaw, founder of the Missouri Botanical Garden. They faced six months of hardship along the Oregon or Santa Fe trails. Most of them walked over 2,000 miles alongside the wagons drawn by oxen or mules. Can you imagine how tired they were upon reaching their destination?

Some simply changed their minds and stopped along the way on fertile soil they found in Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, or other Midwestern states. Most pioneers joined wagon trains to face the challenges of Indian Territory or mountain ranges as a group. Some never made it, such as 39 members of the infamous Donner Party. Gruesome tales persist of their deaths and the near starvation of 48 survivors of that tragic California winter of 1846-47. But an estimated 300,000 Americans successfully traveled the Oregon Trail despite the hardships and loss of over 30,000 of their comrades. That's equal to one grave every 80 yards.

Only 10 years after the invention of the steamboat in New York, the first steamboat to arrive in St Louis was the Zebulon Pike. Two years later, in 1819 steamboat travel began on the Missouri River when the steamboat Independence went 200 miles from St Louis to New Franklin, Missouri, returning with wheat and corn. Thus the era of rapid western expansion had begun as steamboats shipped agricultural products to far away markets in the South and East...eventually as far east as Europe.

Soon river passengers could reach Oregon Territory in only 3 weeks, well rested, and without the stress of worry about attacks by Indians. Steamboats on the Missouri River had a half century Golden Era before the



transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869. Suddenly one could go by rail from New York to Seattle in only 7 days.

And today it can be done in just 7 hours, including the time it takes to get through airport security.

So the shrinkage of time for transportation has changed rapidly with the advent of industrialization in the last 200 years. But the same goal of shrinking time persists today. For example, a physicist I met recently in Vermont is working with his college students on particle beam transportation. Their research shares the same hopes and dreams which are part of Hermann ancestry and part of what it means to be human. That same spirit of adventure into the unknown, combined with hard work and determination, can make the world a better place and create a better life for ourselves, our families, and our communities.