

OLD THRILLS OF LIFE ON RIVER CRAFT

RECALLED BY PIONEER, 90 TODAY

**WM, CAIRNCROSS, DEAN OF BOATMEN, LOOKS BACK
OVER NINE DECADES OF ADVENTUROUS LIFE**

DEC. 21, 1919

A life of adventure, storm and hardship on ocean, lake and river on frontier farm and in primeval forest has arrived at a new milestone today. William Cairncross, at his home, 1202 Sherburne Avenue, is celebrating quietly his completion of nine full decades of existence.

Still hale and hearty and full of cheerful courage that has carried him through a career unexcelled in fiction's greatest tales, he looks back to the time when many of America's greatest cities were villages, when plains now teeming with life were unpopulated wildernesses, when Indians roamed the vast spaces of Minnesota, and when man's life and safety of his family rested solely on his undaunted spirit and his good right arm.

Here to Live in 1894

William Cairncross came to St. Paul to make his home in 1894, but his first visit to this city was as a deckhand on a river packet back in 1840. Born in Scotland in 1829, his life from the time he was 16 years old was one long adventure. His story is interwoven, with the history of the stirring old days on the Mississippi and its tributary waters. He knew the Great Lakes seventy years ago, and the canals which once traversed many of the Eastern and Middle states, were all familiar to him.

As a homesteader in Wisconsin, and a settler in Minnesota, he lived the life of thrills and hardships that went with pioneering in the Great

Northwest. Through the Indian uprising in Minnesota in 1862 he and his family passed unscathed. And so he came at last to St. Paul twenty-five years ago as a safe harbor after all these years of storm and stress and strife.

Living with his daughter, Mrs. L.W. Holzer, his home is the center of one of the most impressive family groups in the Northwest, This dean of the Pioneer Riverman's association has seen his personal family tree grow and flower until the record of its fruitage numbers 105 persons. Twelve children were born to Mr. Cairncross and the fair Scotch maiden whom he wooed and won in a lively romance of the river. Forty-nine grandchildren, forty-three great grandchildren and one great, great grandchild complete the total of 105. Not all of them, of course, survive, yet the family reunions headed by the grand old riverman and pioneer have the appearance of Sunday school picnics.

Should Have a Medal

Someday the foes of race suicide will devise a Roosevelt medal and William Cairncross will be one of the first recipients.

The old sailor's first actual experience before the mast came when he left his home in Scotland on the bark Clansman in May, 1845, for Quebec. He was born at Broughten Ferry, the son of a sailor and fisherman. So he came by his love of the water naturally. The family moved to Dundee when William was 7 years old, and for nine years he spent his playtime and spare hours along the waterfront, clambering into the rigging of the vessels in the busy port and frolicking with the sailors on the decks.

Two years of schooling comprised his entire education-a surprising fact when it is known that he is something of a man of his letters. His writings comprise one of the most interesting stories ever compiled of

life on the rivers and lakes and canals of America. His river stories are unique from the fact that he never held a higher position than second mate and his viewpoint is always that of the lower deck. So far as the old river men of St. Paul know, he is the only writer of river tales, who did not approach his subject from a point of command,

One of the requirements for membership in the Pioneer Rivermen's association is the compilation of the member's personal river boating history. The document turned in by William Cairncross a few years ago was the most voluminous the association had ever received, an every line of it fairly bristles with interest. It has been printed in full by the Burlington Saturday Evening Post, as have two or three of his other writings.

Factory Job Irked Him

When 12 years old he started work in a Scotch linen factory at the munificent wage of 50 cents a week. In the course of years the indoor life became irksome, however, and when he was 16 he sailed away for America, taking his place on board the Clansman as a full-fledged seaman and carrying his share of labor and dangers of that voyage, His autobiography relates a stirring story of a terrible storm at sea, tells of a narrow escape from a huge iceberg and recalls the discovery of a vast sea turtle that looked like a featherbed.

Arrived at the mouth of the St. Lawrence, it took the bark two weeks to beat up the river to Quebec. It reached that city just in time for its crew to witness the destruction of the city by the fire of July, 1845.

Beaten unjustly by the irascible little captain of the Clansman, young Cairncross decided to desert the ship and seek fortune and adventure where it might be found in America. He arrived at this determination with a total capital of 25 cents and started his first night in Montreal curled up in an empty packing case. He had reached Montreal on a ship

which carried refugees from the Quebec fire. A kindhearted sailor discovered the lad in the box and gave him a birth on board the ship for the rest of the night, but the next morning Cairncross was on his way.

Whenever this intrepid youth journeyed from this time on, he worked his way, usually paying his transportation by hard labor on a canal boat, lake craft or river packet. On a canal boat, he went from Montreal to Picton and there found a job with a farmer, toiling for a \$1 a month. In the summer of 1847 word reached him that his family had arrived in New York and he set out to visit them.

Mother Didn't Know Him

He had grown eight inches during the months he lived with the Picton farmer and the canal boat crew with which he had come to Picton failed to recognize him. He found a job driving team for a canal boat and in that way reached Albany, N.Y. There he met his father who also was employed on the canals and together they traveled to New York City. His mother was astonished at his growth and did not know him when he knocked on the door.

Following a short visit with the family, father and son started west, working their way as expert sailormen. Chicago was their destination. William sailed on the steamer Oswego and continued to work on that craft until fall. Chicago to Buffalo was the main run of the boat. In September, the lad had heard that his family had moved to Memphis, so he quit the Oswego at Cleveland and drove team to pay his transportation to Portland down on the Ohio River.

Then in September, 1847, came his introduction to the great system of inland waterways which he was to follow through years of toil and pleasure. The steamer Comet came into Portland shortly after his

arrival, bound for Cairo and he shipped on the craft at an agreed wage of \$20 a month. Arriving at Cairo he found a lone house comprised the town. He found his family at Memphis and he and his father and brother all shipped on river packets. William's berth was on the Harry of the West, named for Governor H.H. Sibley of Minnesota. The boat was in the cotton trade on the Hatchie River in Tennessee.

A month later he joined his father on the Conductor, plying from Memphis up the White River in Arkansas. He was fast making a name for himself as a competent river hand and in all the years that he followed the rivers had no difficulty in finding work.

Two Fists Were Needed

The old river men, or many of them, were they sojourning in our midst today, would be styled "hard boiled". Two fisted, upstanding men, they stood for their rights unflinchingly and took or gave a beating as a part of the day's routine. Bullies were common and any lad who aspired to a place on the river ranks had to be prepared to fight his own battles or take the small end of many of a deal. As the months and years rolled along, young Cairncross developed a robust figure and a sturdiness and strength that enabled him to more than hold his own in personal encounters and his skill as a sailor, learned back in the boyhood days in Scotland, gave him high ranks as a riverman.

He tells the story of a bully he met on one of his earliest trips on the river. The hulking fellow helped himself to the "Cairncross" plate and cup at the table. Unable then, because of his tender years, to defend his rights, he promised the man a future meeting. Some years later, he saw the same man bullying another lad, in the same manner and he administered the beating that the great brute doubly deserved.

On another occasion there was a husky bruiser among the men who were helping to load a packet on which Cairncross was employed. The fellow refused to work and when chided for his laziness became belligerent. He attacked the young deckhand and received a handsome pounding for his pains. His companions attempting an assault in force, the lad drove them off with a club improvised from among the cargo.

As still another example of the same sort, he relates the story of a burly person who had an intense admiration for his own pugilistic abilities. He was known to and down the river as a bully of parts, and not until "Cairncross" gave him a thorough lacing did he come down to earth. The young man discovered that this bully, like many another, had no real courage when the attack was carried into his own territory.

Not a Belligerent Man

From all of which it must not be surmised that old Dad Cairncross was himself a bully and an inveterate fighter in the days of his youth. Remembering the sort of men among, whom he was working and recalling the times in which he lived his river life, his writings are remarkably free of that sort of incidents. They are related here only as giving color to the picture of early days.

Writing in his history for the Rivermen's association of his trips up the White River in the Conductor, he tolls of a condition that will turn every householder's pocketbook green with envy in these days of every mounting living cost.

"The river was perfectly alive with every sort of water fowl. The deer were so numerous they were killed just for their hides and we got two hindquarters of a deer for a quart of whiskey. (Of course that would be no low price either, right now.) We got tired of venison and bought a

four-year-old heifer for five dollars”.

The Asiatic cholera was bad at this time and the crew lost four men on one trip. Two died in a single day.

There is an interesting bit also, in his story, about a certain rainstorm.

“I have seen a great many rainstorms in my time, but the heaviest rain I ever saw struck us as we were going to Memphis. When we saw it coming we made for the bank. I took the headline to make fast to a tree about two rods from the boat and before I got back on the boat my boots were full of water. It was just as if we had run under a waterfall.” Some rain.

In the spring of 1848 young Cairncross went to Chicago, hoofing it about a 100 miles from LaSalle, Ill. where he left the boat. In Chicago he shipped on the Rossiter, running to Green Bay, Wis. He was credited with bringing the Asiatic cholera to Chicago as the first case appeared in his boarding house and he himself has an attack shortly afterward. Telling of this attack and the heroic methods he took to overcome it he writes: “On our second trip I got it before we got to Milwaukee and it raised some excitement. I was on deck. No one would come near me. I was vomiting and cramps were about to come on when the captain asked me what he could do for me. I told him to get me a glass of brandy and red pepper. By good luck he had it. I drank a big glass of it and it was a hot dose. In about five minutes I began to feel the effects of it. I soon began to sweat, I went to bed and when I got to Milwaukee I was all right but a little weak.”

Chicago he says was a village four blocks long and three blocks wide. Fort Dearborn was still there but was torn down that summer. He was offered an opportunity to buy building lots five blocks from the river for \$30 to \$85 each. He didn't think of them as an investment. He has since changed his mind on that score.

Later in the same summer he sailed on the Manhattan, in the grain trade from Chicago to Buffalo. This he described as particularly easy sort of work. The Manhattan later was taken to Lake Superior, being dragged overland around Sault Ste. Marie and was the first steamer on that lake.

Family Had Vanished

In the fall Cairncross traveled from Toledo to Cincinnati by canal and returned to Memphis, only to find his family gone, this time without a trace. He finally found them in Smithland, at the mouth of the Cumberland River in Kentucky. He and his father had made attempts to keep in touch by mail but one of the predecessors of Mr. Burleson seems to have had trouble in the proper delivery of letters even as does the present Postmaster General.

His brother, who had taken ill while working in La Salle, Ill., had lost track of a chest of valuable carpenter's tools, so William set out to find them. Two trips from Kentucky to LaSalle were necessary before the missing chest finally was found at St. Louis and in the meantime he had an interesting experience with the voting customs of the day. The packet on which he was sailing tied up at a dock one morning and the entire crew went ashore and voted. Many packets, he says, tied up at every dock they came to and the crews voted promiscuously all up and down the river. They were not very particular in these days Mr. Cairncross says.

He acquired the ague during his wanderings in pursuit of the tool chest and it resisted every sort of treatment until his father met a man with a positive cure, It was to eat a raw onion the first thing in the morning and twenty minutes after take a drink of whiskey. Just what our old friend Doc Brady would think of this we know not, but suffice it to say in the words of our hero: "It completely cured me. I grew better every day." And there you are.

In 1849, sailing on the Dr. Franklin, young Cairncross came pretty close to St. Paul for the first time. The boat reached Reed's Landing at the foot of Lake Peppen late one afternoon and he climbed the bluff to see what the great prairies looked like. He had heard much about them.

The Outlook Was Gloomy

"I was very much surprised," he says, "to see such a beautiful country and not a living thing on it." It was predicted at that time that there would never be a white settlement west of the Minnesota River as people could not exist there as the vermin were numerous in the summer and the winters were so cold a white man could not live there. A cheerful view of our fair Northwest; is it not?

The Dr. Franklin had several passengers for St. Paul, but it was decided not to go any further north so these men debarked and started the long walk to Minnesota's metropolis.

On the second trip north the Dr. Franklin went up the St. Croix to Stillwater, then a promising settlement of two houses. Hudson, Mr. Cairncross relates was already quite a town.

The craft then headed for St. Paul and the future dweller received his first impressions of the town. Of it he says: "There was nothing between the right side of Third Street and the river, and no house west of where Minnesota Street now is. There was a frame building on Third Street with a double porch. On the lower porch were a number of Indians smoking, and I remember the little log church that stood near the foot of Wabasha Street. That was about the end of May 1849. Little did I think at that time that I would ever make St. Paul my home."

Not long time after that Cairncross sailed on the famous old Dewitt Clinton, plying between St. Louis and New Orleans and Pittsburgh. In February, 1852, he witnessed the blowing up of the Oregon, the largest and best boat on the river

Many persons lost their lives in that catastrophe, and Cairncross played a prominent part in the rescue of survivors and the care of the injured.

In 1851 Cairncross went to Madison, Wis. and from there down into Dane County, where he homesteaded a quarter sections. He worked on his own and neighboring farms that summer, and then returned to the river to earn capital to develop his farm. That fall he made a second trip to St. Paul and was amazed at the growth there and along the river.

The Romance Enters

In 1852 romance enters William Cairncross's life story. Before that time, if one reads his chronicles right, femininity had held small charm for the young river man. But in that year he started back to his Wisconsin claim to break some land and to finish his house. He was determined to be a farmer. At Madison there came aboard the packet a Scotchman, with his wife and daughter, bound for Wisconsin. William relates that he enjoyed many conversations with the father regarding the Scottish homeland and about Bobby Burns, whom the father had known intimately.

At St. Louis he helped the family transfer its baggage to another boat and there a party of young bucks came aboard. One young roisterer, deep in his cups, annoyed the Scotchman's daughter, and Cairncross proceeded to show the young man the error of his way, following his warning with a beating when the drunk one refused to heed. Before reaching La Salle Cairncross and the young lady had exchanged addresses and had called on the family several times that summer. In the fall they were married and the new husband returned to the rivers to acquire further capital for his farm venture, leaving his bride with friends.

He soon obtained a permanent berth on the Alton which was making.....same name, so he sent for Mrs.

Cairncross. The Alton, sometime later, struck a snag in the river eight miles above St. Louis and went on the bottom. Before the craft could be salvaged, the river froze over and Cairncross was put in charge of it, with a boy to help him. He narrowly escaped with his life when the ice broke up.

His next boat was the Kate Kearney, bought to replace the Alton. This boat blew up on a run when he was ashore, but the explosion blasted him clear off the river never less. The accident, which killed one man and wounded several others, caused his wife to plead with him to quit the life of a river man and he consented. He obtained work in charge of the docks at Alton and they remained there until 1856+ when they went to their claim in Wisconsin to make their home.

In 1861 they sold out their holdings in Wisconsin and moved to a home near Henderson, Minn. Laboring all of the summers on their own and neighboring farms. Cairncross and his father and brother, who lived near him, spent their winters cutting wood for fuel and lumber and in teaming. One winter they hauled flour from St. Peter, Minn. to settlers on Big Stone Lake, two hundred miles away. These trips were filled with peril and excitement, but they provided money for the pioneer families.

On these journeys to Big Stone Lake the teamsters made one of their regular stops at the home of Jack Schmahl, father of the Minnesota's Secretary of State, who lived on the edge of Fort Ridgeway Reservation.

During this difficult traveling through snowbound reaches of Minnesota, Cairncross became known to the Indians as Washedo (good man) because of the humane way he treated all of them. His view was that they were human beings like himself and he acquired many useful friends among them.

In 1862 came the Indian uprising in which Fort Ridgely was attacked and New Ulm was raided by the Redskins. Settlers by the hundreds fled

from their homes and left their personal belongings to the Indian raiders but the Cairncross families stuck to the farms and came through the trouble unscathed. They refused to be stampeded by the fears which swept the entire communities away from their homes, and while in peril often, were uninjured.

Life has been very busy, but withal a very happy adventure for William Cairncross, if one might judge from the tone of his writings and from a more intimate view of the man who is 90 years old today. His days are still full of work and friends and family just as they have always been, without the dangers that he knew on the rivers and lakes and plains. He is still actively employed. For many years he has been a fireman at the plant of Griggs Cooper & Co. and is still employed there. Although for the past few days he has been remaining at home to treat a cold. He will shortly be back on the job again, useful and trustworthy in the post as he has been in every other which he has filled in his long life.

This is the heading in the St Paul Pioneer Press

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SECOND SECTION.

THE SAINT PAUL PIONEER P.

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