



We'd lie there under the cottonwoods and talk about the old days and how we'd of run away and got jobs on the steamboats

HIGH-CLASS

By Stud Elliott and Frank McCarthy

When we were kids, all Stud Elliott and I could think of was how we'd work on the river boats someday. Stud's on the river now, and I'm—well, I'd just as soon not say where I am

SOMEPLACE west of Chicago, on that auto trip to the Black Hills, you'll come to a bridge that arches high above a river, a pretty big river, and that'll be the Mississippi.

"Look, now put them comic books down, you children. This is the Mississippi River," says Papa.

"I got another of my sick headaches coming on," says Mother. "Stop at the next drugstore and I'll pick up some asperin tablets. I wonder is this bridge safe?"

Ever since the family left Massillon, Mother has been wondering if the bridges are safe.

"Papa, c'n we have an ice cream Smoozie bar?" says little Verne, pinching the baby surreptitiously to see if she'll squawk.

"I wonder will we find a good motel in Fort Dodge," says Mother.

"I am glad," says Papa, "that we are spending fifty dollars a day on this educational trip, because it is sure improving the kiddies' minds and broadening their horizons."

By then, the Mississippi is behind and the kids return to fighting over the comic books; the baby throws up, and Mother says did you remember to stop the paper before we left?

Looking at famous rivers en route is not very profitable anyway as most of them look alike to the amateur, while viewing something like the Dickey-

ville Grotto, in Dickeyville, Wisconsin, which is a shrine built by hand entirely of broken glass and reject onyx gearshift knobs, gives you something to talk about when you are bragging up the trip at home.

The upper Mississippi is nevertheless something to brag about to the inhabitants of its valley and it gets worked overtime in high-school descriptive themes and pamphlets issued by the chamber of commerce; and rightly so, for it is really some river. There's a lot of fish in it and history galore, and there's scenery and boating and hunting and hand-painted sunsets, and in the fall of the year the ducks and geese begin flopping down into the sloughs, and the bluffs turn all different colors as the autumn haze drifts through the birches and back to the prairies.

But a big river like this without any shipping on it is a lonesome and tragic affair, no matter how beautiful it all is, and that's the way it was up until the government put in the dams and created the slack-water system. In the twenties, when I was a kid, there wasn't any shipping, and in the course of a whole summer vacation spent bumming around on the river between Cassville Chute and Bellevue, Iowa, I don't believe we'd seen more than half a dozen steamboats; there was the old Elinor, the government boat that maintained the buoy and

light system for a nonexistent river traffic; there was the mighty excursion steamer Capitol, whose popcorn machine you could smell upstream a mile and a half, and whose colored jazz band could be heard pretty nearly to Chicago; and once in a while somebody would send a few barges of coal to St. Paul in front of some Ohio River steamboat and they'd spend two months getting there, aground most of the time.

We'd lie in the shade down on Nine Mile Island, Stud Elliott and I, and watch one of these curiosities go by. "Just think," he'd say. "Back a few years there were packets and raft boats and all kinds of steamboats up in here. Wouldn't that be gay, though? Man, I wished it was them old times, don't you?"

Then we'd fry up some catfish and lie there under the cottonwoods and talk about the old days and how we'd of run away and got jobs on the steamboats; Stud said it was easy to get a job in the engine room in those times but you had to have pull to get a cub pilot's job. I thought about it so much I do believe I'd have done anything on earth to be a cub pilot on the Grey Eagle or the Key City or the Morning Star or even the Uncle Toby. We knew the names of all the old boats—boats that had died, some of them, thirty years or more before we were born—because we used to (Continued on page 56)

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK MCCARTHY

