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Paddle Wheel Steamboat Trip

In 1911, the Fresno Chamber of Commerce created a Navigation Committee to mobilize government and commercial support for restoring navigation to California's San Joaquin River. They used a well-publicized riverboat journey of the steamer J. R. McDonald from Stockton to Skaggs Bridge at Kerman to build public interest in the project. Historically, the river was used by commercial steamboats during the California gold rush as a highway to ship supplies inland from the large ports at San Francisco and Oakland. Freight was generally shipped by railroad ever since Fresno Station had been established by the Central Pacific Railroad Company in 1872. The San Francisco Call reported that the Fresno Navigation Committee believed river transportation was a more affordable alternative to export the San Joaquin Valley's agricultural products. The Committee hoped the novelty of a paddlewheel steamboat on the San Joaquin River for the first time in over twenty years would excite public and government interest in their efforts to restore navigation to the river.

Even in 1911, concern about Central California's water use was not new. Since the first settlements in Fresno County, farmers had been building canals and rudimentary dams on the San Joaquin River to manage the water flow so that the seasonal flood and drought cycles did not negatively impact crops. The San Joaquin River was the focus of many modifications and water management projects following the irrigation crisis of 1886. California's Wright Act of 1887 formally allowed farmers to form public irrigation control districts to manage water resources. In addition, congressional records from the last decades of the nineteenth century indicate federal interest in the management of water resources in the San Joaquin Valley.

In one petition to Congress from 1890, the California Legislature requested \$2,000,000 in appropriations to restore navigation to the Sacramento, San Joaquin, and Feather rivers. The Legislature argued that hydraulic mining in the foothills since the gold rush had raised the riverbeds. They wanted funding to dredge the resulting sediment to shore up the banks against seasonal flooding and create long-term water storage solutions. Local community irrigation control districts proved unable to muster the resources required for extensive projects.

In 1902, the United States Bureau of Reclamation was created to build and manage dams and irrigation systems in the American West. Generally, agricultural interests preferred to divert water from the river, resulting in a level too low for navigation. This had the potential to cause conflict with urban Valley business interests who wanted to use the river for commercial shipping.

To see the dreams of over two decades come to fruition, the Fresno Navigation Committee purchased the steamer J. R. McDonald and the barge Eastside and proposed the upriver journey to prove that navigation on the San Joaquin River was still possible. They recruited San Joaquin River pilot C. P. McMurtry, a veteran of the river trade during its heyday in the 1860s. The exploratory trip began in Stockton on June 9, 1911, and ended at Skaggs Bridge near Kerman on June 15.

The Committee had secured consignment orders from Valley businesses and prominent citizens to demonstrate the sustainability of commercial navigation. The J. R. McDonald's barge carried two hundred tons of freight for various businesses along the way, with one hundred twenty-five tons destined for Fresno. The San Francisco Call reported that the Committee, along with members of the Stockton Chamber of Commerce, believed that demonstrating the successful completion of a trip up the river would entice state and federal governments to subsidize their efforts.

The Fresno Morning Republican sent reporter F. B. Moore along on the journey and gave the paddlewheel voyage front page coverage throughout the week. On June 9, 1911, The Fresno Morning Republican stated the main purpose of the voyage was an exploration of the new channels of the river “preliminary to a survey which the government has authorized, looking to establishing a series of locks in the river, and for general improvement of the upper reaches of the stream.”

A few of the Committee members met the steamer at Salt Slough near Los Banos to ride along for part of the journey. They were joined by notables W. R. Wheeler, manager of the Traffic Bureau of San Francisco Merchants' Exchange; and Colonel Biddle and Major Cheney of the Army Corps of Engineers, who had a vested interest in the experiment. Wheeler was quoted in The San Francisco Call on June 15 saying, “The people of Fresno are much interested in restoring the navigability of the river for six or eight months, if not for the entire year.”

Local leaders on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley were particularly interested in creating a deeper river channel with higher banks because of the danger of flooding when the snow melt reached its peak. On June 14, 1911, The San Francisco Call reported that the San Joaquin River had the highest water levels in years. In the week following the steamer trip, the San Joaquin River gained over seven feet, which caused flooding in Mendota and Los Banos when the Temple Slough weir broke. Following these events, a similar committee of businessmen was formed in Mendota to further investigate profitable navigation on the San Joaquin and Tuolumne rivers.

After leaving Stockton, the J. R. McDonald made five stops along the river to deliver goods to various Valley businesses. The ship's manifest, which is housed in the Fresno Historical Society Archives, contains receipts from goods delivered and details the stops,

businesses, and landings where freight was offloaded. From this document, we learn that Crows Landing served Turlock establishments, while Hills Ferry Landing served businesses in Newman, Gustine, and Stevensons. The next stop was Salt Slough Warehouse which served Los Banos interests, whereas Temple Warehouse served Dos Palos.

The river landings had not been used in years, and The Fresno Morning Republican reported the necessity of repairing neglected drawbridges and moving electrical lines in order to let the steamer through. On June 14, the successful passage of the steamer through the Miller & Lux irrigation dam near Mendota was reported with relief.

The final stop on Thursday, June 15, 1911, which served Kerman, Madera and Fresno, was at Skaggs Bridge, since the bridge prevented the steamer from going any farther upriver. The J. R. McDonald and barge were met by over three thousand people from Fresno and the surrounding area who motored out to meet the steamer. The chairman of the Fresno Navigation Committee, Henry Hawson, gave a welcome speech, followed by businessman T. J. Hammond, who had secured the steamer from the Pacific Navigation and Improvement Company of Stockton. In addition, Fresno mayor Chester Rowell, Assemblyman W. F. Chandler, and Fresno Chamber of Commerce President Wylie M. Giffen spoke in support of the endeavor. The barge Eastside was rechristened the Fresno in honor of a successful voyage. Photographs from the Fresno Historical Society's Archives show a general picnic atmosphere ensued with the public allowed to roam the steamer and barge at will.

Deliveries of goods to Fresno businesses took two days with many vehicles recruited to help haul the freight the twenty miles into town. According to the J. R. McDonald's manifest, a number of local Fresno businesses and individuals supported the Navigation Committee's efforts by ordering goods, including Kutner-Goldstein Department Store, Fresno Agricultural Works, Fresno Brewing

Company, and Holland & Holland Cash Grocery. In addition, the Woodward Bros. Agricultural Works was listed in the manifest as receiving a large shipment of agricultural supplies, including grindstones, shovels, handles, steel singletrees, and cast steel from the steamer.

The J. R. McDonald and the barge Fresno left Skaggs Bridge early in the morning on June 17, 1911, after the final deliveries were made. It was bound for Stockton with a load of raisins. The crew retrieved six thousand sacks of barley near Crows Landing and made it back to Stockton within three days.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported on June 21, "The trip, which was closely observed by Government and State officials, has convinced the authorities of the practicability of upriver navigation, and it is believed here that the United States Government will now take official cognizance of the demands throughout the Valley for surveys preliminary to the restoration of the stream to navigation."

It turned out that the Fresno Navigation Committee had based their hopes on a successful trip in a remarkably high water year. Subsequent low water years and lack of funds conspired to thwart their efforts. The Bureau of Reclamation built the Friant Dam and Friant-Kern Canal on the San Joaquin River between 1937 and 1942, continuing the process of landscape modifications necessary for San Joaquin Valley water storage. These water diversions would help to make the San Joaquin Valley one of the most agriculturally productive regions in the world.

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