

After the Steamboats

Steamboats ruled trade and travel during the 1800s and early 1900s. However, newer forms of transportation created competition for steamboats. And by 1880 trains took away much of their business. In the twentieth century the invention of cars, trucks, and airplanes made the steamboats obsolete.

Navigation on the lower Arkansas River was difficult since boats were at the mercy of Mother Nature. There were times when the river was so shallow that people could walk across from Little Rock to Argenta (now North Little Rock). Floods during the 1920s enveloped the surrounding areas of the lower Arkansas River including cities, towns, and farm lands. Groups like the Arkansas River Flood Control Association and the Arkansas Basin Development Association worked to inform and lobby members of Congress about the need for waterway development. It was not until 1958 that the navigation system construction began after Senator John L. McClellan of Arkansas and Senator Robert S. Kerr of Oklahoma championed for waterway transportation along the Arkansas River. On October 4, 1968, navigation was opened to Little Rock, Arkansas, and by 1970 the navigation system along the lower Arkansas River was ready for full use.

January 21, 1971, the first commercial barge to travel the full length of the waterway, docked at the Tulsa Port of Catoosa. The McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System (MKARNS) was dedicated on June 5, 1971. The MKARNS was constructed with seventeen locks and dams to make the river navigable. The dams formed a series of “navigation pools” that were connected by a lock which enables vessels to move from one pool to another. The locks and pools created a “staircase” that permitted vessels to “climb” 420 feet in elevation from the Mississippi River to the Tulsa Port of Catoosa.

Towboats now rule trade transportation along the Arkansas River with the ability to transport seventeen barges at once, and each barge carrying 1500 tons of commodities. According to Gene Higginbotham, executive director of the Arkansas Waterways Commission, the navigation system has an estimated \$1.3 billion economic impact annually for the State of Arkansas. In 2014, over eleven million tons of commodities were floated up and down the MKARNS. Some of the commodities shipped along the river are Colorado coal, Kansas wheat, Oklahoma soybeans, and Arkansas rice.

By Allison Hiblong, Arkansas Inland Maritime Museum

Allison Hiblong is a graduate of the public history program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She is currently the director of operations at the Arkansas Inland Maritime Museum. The Arkansas Inland Maritime Museum has been in operation since 2005, commemorating America’s rich naval history through the preservation and exhibition of historic naval vessels. The museum received the

Arkansas River Historical Society collection in 2013 and has expanded its exhibitions to include the history of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System history.