



Montreal to Buffalo to Detroit by steamer. Train to New Buffalo MI. Steamer to Chicago and Milwaukee. Road to Galena on the Mississippi or Chicago to the Mississippi somehow. 44 to 72 hours.

In 1851, traveling from Milwaukee all the way to Buffalo, N.Y., in just 44 hours



Railroads in Michigan, with steamboat routes on the Great Lakes. Drawn and engraved for Doggett's railroad guide & gazetteer. Published 1848. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C.

## MARY LOU MONTGOMERY

From the time of their marriage until the start of the war between the states, Tilden R. Selmes (an early settler of Hannibal, Missouri) and his Vermont-born wife would make repeated trips back to New England to see family, negotiate with wholesalers and seek financial support for business expansion.

In April 1851, a popular mode of transportation was offered by the Michigan Central Rail Road Line, a trip that crossed both Lake Erie and Lake Michigan by steamer.

Ticket agent James Crummey of Milwaukee boasted that the Michigan Central Rail Road Line could transport passengers (and freight) from Milwaukee all the way to Buffalo, N.Y.,

in just 44 hours. Facilitating this rapid and economical mode of transportation was the addition on Lake Michigan of two “low pressure” steamboats, the Arctic and Ward, together with standbys the Pacific and St. Louis.

Tilden Selmes was a passenger aboard the Michigan Central Rail Road Line of Steamboats on the Lake in late August 1851, traveling from Buffalo, N.Y., to Chicago. Service was such that a group of passengers came together and wrote a protest letter addressed to newspapers along the route. The Milwaukee Daily Sentinel and Gazette published the letter on Sept. 2, 1851. On Sept. 11, 1851, the same newspaper published a counter letter. Between the two letters, the story of this 167-year-old mode of transportation emerges.

The Arctic and Ward steamers alternately left Buffalo and Detroit, Mich., at 7 o’clock in the evening, crossing paths midway on Lake Erie.

At Detroit, Chicago-bound passengers met a scheduled train, which took them from Detroit to Hillsdale, Mich. The rail connection between Hillsdale and New Buffalo, Mich., on the eastern bank of Lake Michigan, was scheduled to open in April 1849.

Once at New Buffalo, passengers boarded a Lake Michigan steamboat that ran daily between New Buffalo, Mich., Chicago and Milwaukee, Wis.

The timeframe for a trip from Buffalo, N.Y., to Milwaukee was predicted at about 45 hours.

Aboard the Arctic

Instead of 45 hours, the trip in which Selmes was a passenger took nearly 72 hours, according to the complaining committee.

Instead of departing from Buffalo at 7 p.m., the Arctic left dock at 10 p.m. on Aug. 28, 1851. Fingers of blame for the late departure pointed each way, but it seems that late-arriving passengers were the cause of the delay.

When the boat arrived in Detroit, the passengers had missed their rail connection by just a few minutes. The next train was at 8 o’clock the next morning, thus leaving the passengers stranded in Detroit overnight, with few options for accommodations.

Finally aboard the train as scheduled the next morning, the passengers arrived in New Buffalo, Mich., only to learn that the steamer on which they were to ride across Lake Michigan was delayed.

The scheduled steamer – the St. Louis – had been disabled by a collision with a propeller. A substitute steamer, on which Selmes was a passenger, was in actuality a mail boat, and by regulation could not leave port until a connecting mail train arrived, delaying the travelers even further.

Capt. F.G. Butlin commanded the steamer Arctic beginning in 1851, and continued in that position until the railroad completed its lines around the lake. He was born near London, England, in 1824, and came to the United States as a child with his parents. His motto was: “Eternal vigilance is the price of success.” In late life was considered to be among prominent self-made men of Chicago.