

PADDLE WHEELS OF COMMERCE

George Caleb Bingham's *Boatmen on the Missouri* (1846) depicts an occurrence familiar to mid-nineteenth-century travelers in the West: men on a flatboat drifting silently downstream with a load of fuelwood. At the time, nearly all steamboats burned wood in their fireboxes to create the steam that turned their paddle wheels. According to one historian, a single steamboat making the round trip journey between Louisville, Kentucky, and New Orleans, Louisiana, in the 1840s burned on average 504 cords of wood (a single cord measures four feet high by four feet deep by eight feet long).¹ Steamboats carried only a limited amount of fuelwood, usually enough to last about twelve hours of running time, because boat owners wished to devote as much space as possible to paying passengers and freight.²

To meet the demand for fuelwood en route, men called "woodhawks" sold chopped and corded wood from stations along the riverbank. Some entrepreneurial individuals established woodyards where steamboats could tie up, while others, such as those Bingham represented in this painting, floated chopped wood out to passing steamboats.³ A German traveling on the upper Mississippi River in the 1850s witnessed this refueling method firsthand:

[The woodhawks] have built small crude ships or flatboats which are kept constantly in full load. Up front it is posted what the load of wood costs. The captain takes his telescope and reads the figure. If it suits him, he calls over to the shore "Cast off!" and immediately the woodman springs onto his flatboat and secures it to the side of ours. We proceed with him in tow for a couple of miles

and the wood is unloaded. Then the man pushes off with his boat lightened but his pocketbook pleasantly enhanced, for the return to his wood place.⁴

Given the high volume of river traffic, where hundreds of steamboats making dozens of trips each year made the major western rivers the equivalent of present-day interstate highways, as well as the relatively easy access to timber along all the major rivers, many men found selling fuelwood to steamboats a lucrative business. Some even claimed it was more profitable than the other primary occupation of the area, farming.⁵ Bingham, a longtime resident of Missouri, undoubtedly witnessed these men and their refueling operations during his frequent travels aboard steamboats in the West.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879) was born in Augusta County, Virginia, and at the age of eight moved with his family to Franklin, Missouri. He was initially inspired to become a painter by Chester Harding, who briefly visited Franklin in 1822 to complete his portrait of the region's most famous resident, Daniel Boone.⁶ Eventually, Bingham became a successful portraitist, to the degree that portrait commissions provided him with a stable source of income for the rest of his life, but his letters tell us he longed to create more ambitious works.⁷ Therefore, in 1838 he traveled to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and possibly New York, where, in an effort to improve his skills, he examined paintings in public collections, purchased drawings, engravings, and plaster casts, and perhaps even enrolled in anatomy classes.⁸

For the next six years Bingham complemented his portrait practice with genre and landscape subjects, but he



23. George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879), *Boatmen on the Missouri*, 1846
Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (63.8 x 76.8 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 1979.7.15



Fig. 23.1. George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879), *Boatman: Study for "Boatmen on the Missouri,"* 1839. Graphite and gray and black washes on wove paper, 9 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (24.5 × 20.5 cm). Private collection

could find no patron consistently interested in these pictures. That changed, however, in 1845, when the American Art-Union, a New York–based organization devoted to stimulating public support for American artists, purchased two genre scenes and two landscapes from him.⁹ The next year the same group purchased four more paintings from him, including *Boatmen on the Missouri*. For this one painting he was paid \$100—the most money he had received for a genre painting to date.¹⁰ Bingham had finally found an institutional patron willing to pay handsomely for this kind of painting, and over the next six years he developed a repertoire of works depicting life in the West for this organization. As a result, by 1849 he was known locally and nationally as “the Missouri Artist.”¹¹

Boatmen on the Missouri may represent a familiar aspect of life on the Missouri River, but the painting is not a transcription of reality. Western travelers generally found actual woodmen to be unsavory characters. One traveler termed them “outcasts,” while another described them as “generally tall, lanky, unwashed men, with clay-coloured faces, looking for all the world as though they had been made out of the same mud that dyes the Mississippi waters.”¹² Boatmen as a class also had a poor reputation.¹³ In preparation for his painting, Bingham did not sketch real woodmen or boatmen. Instead, he asked his acquaintances to dress in the appropriate costume and posed them in emulation of figures he found in engravings after Renaissance paintings (fig. 23.1).¹⁴ As a result, the men in his paintings appear clean, respectably dressed, and perhaps even a bit genteel, in contrast to the threatening and dirty ruffians his contemporaries described in their travel accounts and diaries.

The artist then used these sketches as the basis for his painting, placing each figure in a rigorously structured composition. The three boatmen and their flatboat form a pyramid and thus appear as a self-contained unit. However, the artist’s placement of the figures on the boat also connects them to their surroundings. The man on the far left sits on a thick plank resting across the two gunwales at the front of the craft. Dressed in striped trousers, a loose-fitting shirt, and a hat with a broken crown, he faces to the right while clasping his knee with his hands and looking out at the viewer. The figure to the far right, wearing brownish red pants, a shirt tied at the neck with a red kerchief, and a cream-colored hat, perches on the load of chopped wood stacked across the midsection of the boat. He too looks out toward us. To the rear of the boat is a man dressed in mauve

pants, loose-fitting shirt, and a cream-colored hat who tenses his stooped frame to scoop a shovelful of bark chips overboard. By positioning each figure farther back on the boat, Bingham subtly leads our eye to the thickly wooded riverbank on the shore behind them. In addition, by posing the men so that the head of the man on the left is lowest in the composition, that of the stooping man slightly higher, and the head of the man leaning against the woodpile the highest, Bingham encourages us to read the composition from left to right, thereby establishing a momentum that connects these woodhawks to the steamboat visible at the far right. We are therefore able to see them as much-needed middlemen who, by transforming the forest into fuelwood, advance the machinery of commerce, the steamboat.

Although it is carefully composed, *Boatmen on the Missouri* nonetheless appears "real." Most paintings representing shipping take as their vantage point a riverbank or shoreline. Bingham, by contrast, positions his viewer hovering five or six feet above the water in front of the boat. He also has two of the men look out toward us. In so doing they seem to acknowledge our presence. Or do they? Their expressionless faces also suggest that they are simply looking at the scenery downriver behind us, and if this is so, then we do

not exist for them. We are thus encouraged to believe we are witness to life along the river as it cannot be seen from the river's edge, and therefore what we see appears authentic.

Bingham's painting ultimately contributes to the mythification of the American West. By identifying the men in the painting's title as "boatmen" and not as "woodhawks," and by representing two of the men relaxing, we all overlook the labor they had previously expended. Woodmen typically spent the winter cutting, chopping, hauling, and stacking wood in anticipation of steamboat traffic that began after the spring thaw. Such work must have been laborious, dangerous, and dirty, to say nothing of the mosquitoes that swarmed during the warmer months. Moreover, woodmen did not usually load wood onto a passing steamboat; instead, this job fell to the boat's crew.¹⁵ Woodmen therefore must have often appeared as boatmen to travelers like Bingham who only saw them as they rowed a load of fuelwood out to a steamboat, waited for it to be loaded, and then drifted back downstream. *Boatmen on the Missouri* would have us believe the American West was a place where easy profits come from nature's abundance, not the physical labor required to transform nature into a saleable commodity.¹⁶ [KM]

Boatmen on the Missouri

1. Amount cited in David E. Schob, "Woodhawks and Cordwood," *Journal of Forest History* 21, no. 3 (July 1977): 126. There were hundreds of steamboats on western rivers in the middle of the nineteenth century, making dozens of trips up- and downriver. Therefore, the total amount of fuelwood consumed was enormous. The historian Michael Williams has calculated that in 1840 alone some 863,353 cords of wood were sold in the counties that abutted the Mississippi and Ohio rivers and that most of this wood was used as fuelwood for steamboats; see Williams, "Products of the Forest: Mapping the Census of 1840," *Journal of Forest History* 24, no. 1 (January 1980): 9.
2. Williams, "Products of the Forest," 10.
3. A concise and comprehensive discussion of woodhawks and woodyards is Schob, "Woodhawks and Cordwood," 124–132. In 1849 Bingham painted a scene of a woodyard, now unlocated. However, a contemporary description of the painting does exist; see E. Maurice Bloch, *The Paintings of George Caleb Bingham: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 180–181.
4. Johann Georg Kohl, *Reisen im Nordwesten der Vereinigten Staaten* (New York, 1857), 176–177, translated and quoted in Schob, "Woodhawks and Cordwood," 131.
5. The amount of money spent on fuelwood was not insignificant. Williams estimates that steamboat companies spent \$1.2 million on fuelwood in 1829. Although he does not include figures for later years, this amount increased as the number of steamboats operating on western rivers multiplied and larger steamboats were built. By the 1840s the average annual cost for fuel per steamboat was \$12,594, a figure that represents 26.7% of the boat's annual operating costs; see Williams, "Products of the Forest," 9–10. The price of fuelwood varied according to the location, season, and quality. However, on the eve of the Civil War, it cost between \$1.25 and \$6.00 a cord; see Schob, "Woodhawks and Cordwood," 124.
6. Bingham later (1872) recalled: "The wonder and delight with which his [Harding's] works filled my mind infused them indelibly upon my then unburdened memory." Bingham to J. Colvin Randall, 25 December 1872, quoted in Bloch, *Paintings*, 9. Bingham did not become a painter immediately after Harding's visit to Franklin because Bingham's father died the next year and Bingham needed to work to help his destitute mother. In the following years Bingham apprenticed as a cabinetmaker, and it was not until he encountered another itinerant portrait painter sometime in the late 1820s that he decided to pursue a career as a portraitist; see *ibid.*, 272.
7. In 1837 Bingham wrote his friend James S. Rollins: "There is no honourable sacrifice which I would not make to attain eminence in the art to which I have devoted myself. I am aware of the difficulties in my way, and am cheered by the thought that they are not greater [than] those which impeded the course of Harding and [Thomas] Sully, and many others, it is by combatting that we can overthrow them and by determined perseverance, I expect to be successful." Bingham to Rollins, 6 May 1837, quoted in *ibid.*, 9–10. The "difficulties" Bingham refers to may be the fact that he was self-taught, as was Harding. He may also be acknowledging that he was embarking on a career as a painter far from the eastern art centers, where training, resources, and patrons were more plentiful.
8. Curiously, this trip stimulated Bingham to paint his first genre scene of life along a western river (unfortunately now lost), which he exhibited at the Apollo Gallery in New York, a forerunner of the American Art-Union; see *ibid.*, 10. Perhaps it was only by going east that Bingham came to realize the suitability of western subjects for his more ambitious paintings.
9. The American Art-Union (AA-U) was formed to support American artists, educate ordinary citizens about the arts, and encourage patronage of American artists. To achieve these ends, the organization solicited yearly subscriptions from individuals living all over the country. These subscribers received an engraving and a chance to win an original work of art. The AA-U purchased paintings directly from American artists, which were exhibited in New York and then distributed to individual members by way of a lottery. Bingham's dealings with the AA-U are concisely and insightfully analyzed in *ibid.*, 11–15.
10. See *ibid.*, 176.
11. See *St. Louis Daily Missouri Republican*, 17 April 1849; and *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* 2, no. 6 (September 1849): 10.
12. Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1833), 2:187–188, quoted in Schob, "Woodhawks and Cordwood," 127; and Matilda Houston, *Hesperos: or, Travels in the West*, 2 vols. (London, 1850), 2:49, quoted in *ibid.*, 129. Anthony Trollope was one traveler, and there were others, who did not find woodmen suspect; see *ibid.*, 128–129.
13. The reputation of boatmen may have derived in large part from the legends of Mike Fink, a real boatman who was mythologized in humorous adventure tales published in the first half of the nineteenth century. For an account of the historical and folklorish aspect of Mike Fink, with a collection of Mike Fink stories, see *Half Horse Half Alligator: The Growth of the Mike Fink Legend*, ed. Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).
14. Bingham's preparatory drawings are discussed in E. Maurice Bloch, *The Drawings of George Caleb Bingham, with a Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975), 11–14. Nancy Rash has suggested the seated figure in *Boatmen on the Missouri* is based on the seated river god in Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving after Raphael's *Judgment of Paris*. She also notes that the stooping figure in the center of Bingham's composition "recalls and reverses Michelangelo's digging Noah in the Sistine Ceiling"; see Rash, *The Paintings and Politics of George Caleb Bingham* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 82. Even though Bingham did not depict real woodmen, the men he did represent are dressed in the appropriate clothing. In her 1850 account of her travels in the West, Houston noted that woodmen generally dressed in "an old broad brimmed hat, with the crown half out, and boots of untanned leather, with the pantaloons tucked down inside of them." Houston, quoted in Schob, "Woodhawks and Cordwood," 129.
15. Steamboat captains also enticed able-bodied male passengers to assist in loading fuelwood by offering them reduced fares for passage; see *ibid.*, 131–132.
16. On the myth of the West as a place of easy profits, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 97–133. The woodman disappeared after the Civil War, when steamboats converted to coal-burning boilers. The shift from wood to coal was motivated by the costliness and bulkiness of wood, but also by a growing concern over the depletion of timber sources; see Schob, "Woodhawks and Cordwood," 124. Mark Twain lamented the disappearance of the woodman in his *Life on the Mississippi* (1884): "He [the woodman] used to fringe the river all the way; his close-ranked merchandise stretched from the one city to the other, along the banks, and he sold uncountable cords of it every year for cash on the nail; but all the scattering boats that are left burn coal now, and the seldomest spectacle on the Mississippi to-day is a wood-pile. Where now is the once wood-yard man?" See Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1884; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 257.

MASTERWORKS OF
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