



Piloting the River: An Evolution of Dells Boat Tours

For more than 165 years, boat excursions have taken visitors along the Wisconsin River, through the shady canyons, for an up-close view of the craggy cliffs that are the signature of Wisconsin Dells. Over time, this spectacular attraction has left a colorful history in its wake; evolving from rowboats, to steam paddlers to today's double-decker steel vessels that carry thousands of visitors each season.

The first entrepreneur to bring Dells sightseers closer to this spectacle of nature was lumber rafter Leroy Gates. A colorful character himself, Gates made sure his legacy would be known by carving an inscription in the Narrows of the Wisconsin River that reads, "Leroy Gates, Dells and River Pilot, 1849 to 1858" ("Others Before You," 1997). In 1856, Gates took out an ad, declaring he had "purchased a pleasure boat for the purpose of penetrating the numerous occult caves of the dells" ("Others Before You," 1997). Gates' pursuit ushered Wisconsin Dells into an era of tourism that continues today.

Following Gates' lead, throughout the late 1850s and 1860s individual guides took groups of tourists, usually consisting of three to four people, through the Dells in wooden rowboats. By way of rowboat tours, or on one's own two feet, remained the only way to see the Dells for a number of years.

In June 1873, boat tours changed forever with the long-awaited arrival of the first steamboat, the *Modocawanda*. It was an immediate success and a few weeks later a second boat, the *Dell Queen*, arrived ready to show the ever-growing number of tourists the sights of the Dells.

As the popularity of the scenic boat tours grew, railroad companies began to organize river excursions to the area. In June 1874, the first such group excursion came from nearby Portage, and these "group tours" continued to be an important part of Dells tourist traffic for several more years.

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, steamboats continued to gain popularity, but rowboats were still the vehicle most often used by independent tour operators. The steamboat operators and the smaller river guides even teamed up for tours. Passengers could ride a paddle steamer upstream to Witches Gulch, and then enjoy a leisurely ride back downstream in a rowboat.

In 1891, the railroads and boat companies collaborated again, this time on the building of a new, improved boat landing. This new landing featured a street-level ticket stand, reception room and an enclosed stairway down to the pier. The railroads improved the landing even further by planting grass, trees and shrubs at the depot, and laying down a gravel path from the embankment to the building. In addition, an orchestral ensemble from Milwaukee performed to make the experience more festive.

The Dells saw its first gasoline-powered tour boat in 1894, signaling the end of an era for guided rowboat tours. The year 1901 brought another development, the “Naptha launch.” These smaller, propeller-driven boats quickly became popular when tourists discovered that they offered a better view than a wide steamboat. Thus, propeller-driven boats became the norm for Dells Boat Tours.

The year 1908 brought dramatic changes to the Dells and the Wisconsin River itself. A new high dam was built along with a new hydroelectric power plant which was needed to fuel industry and farming in the region. This split the river into two sections, the Upper Dells and the Lower Dells, and ultimately blocked the Portage railroad excursion boats from accessing the Upper Dells scenic areas. The dam also caused the water level to rise 17 feet on the new Upper Dells, which meant the loss of some sights such as Diamond Grotto and Giant’s Hand. On the upside however, it also made Witches Gulch and Stand Rock more accessible than they had been in the past.

As the number of people visiting the Dells grew, so did the number of companies running boat tours. The increased competition added pressure on the companies to lure visitors to their ticket booths often leading to vendors soliciting people on the street. When this activity was outlawed in 1918, the more aggressive sellers moved to the Wisconsin River bridge at the entrance to the town. Jumping on the running boards of cars as they passed, ticket hawkers would lean in, asking, “Do you have your tickets to get into the Dells?”

In 1946, the first double-decked touring boat made of steel rather than the standard wood made its debut in the Dells. Another soon followed and by the end of the 1950s, all boats used for touring the Dells were made of steel.

As the years went by, some of the smaller companies stopped giving tours and eventually only three major companies remained - Olson Boat Company, Riverview Boat Line and Dells Boat Company. Eventually, the three companies merged to become Dells Boat Tours, the only tour operator authorized to make shorelandings at Witches Gulch and Stand Rock.