



Piloting the River: A History of Adventure

Before there were power spins and screams of excitement caused by an exhilarating ride on a Jet Boat, real life-and-death adventures brought out the hoots and howls along the banks of the Wisconsin River. Early travelers consisted primarily of daring rivermen who rode huge rafts of milled lumber down river to market. It was a courageous feat to navigate the huge lumber rafts through “the Narrows” at Wisconsin Dells, a spot where the river naturally narrows and where there once were deadly rapids and swirling whirlpools.

One of those early raftsmen was the first entrepreneur to bring sightseers closer to the spectacular scenery of the region. Leroy Gates was a colorful character and when he wasn’t running lumber, he took tourists, three or four at a time, on a guided excursion along the river via wooden rowboat. Others followed suit and throughout the late 1850s and 1860s by rowboat tour, or on foot, remained the only way to see the Dells for a number of years. Gates was a river pilot from 1849 to 1858, his pursuit of which ushered Wisconsin Dells into an era of tourism that continues today.

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. 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.

The Dells saw its first gasoline-powered tour boat in 1894, signaling the end of an era for guided rowboat tours. Soon after, smaller propeller-driven boats quickly became popular when tourists discovered that they offered a better view than a wide steamboat.

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 needed to fuel industry and farming in the region. This divided the river into two sections, the Upper Dells and the Lower Dells. The dam caused the water level to rise 17 feet on the new Upper Dells, which meant the loss of some scenic areas, but also improved the accessibility of others such as Witches Gulch and Stand Rock.

As the number of people visiting the Dells grew, so did the number of companies operating boat tours. The increased competition added pressure on the companies to woo 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.

A half century later, the need for speed has taken boat excursions to yet another new level. The high-powered Jet Boat Adventures splashed onto the scene in 2001 and quickly became a popular tour option for visitors looking for some excitement along with the spectacular scenery.

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 and fast-paced Jet Boats that carry thousands of visitors each season.