

Colorado River Steamboats

The beautiful but harsh lands of Southern Arizona inspired ingenuity among early Americans – many learned to use the natural resources for their livelihoods, and a few even amassed great wealth. Among those early Americans were businessmen who sought to transport goods over the great distances without the use of this wonderful invention, the train. Imagine how difficult it was to move people and products through this part of the country without cars, trucks, planes, or trains. This story will give you a perspective of how it was done way back then.

The California gold rush triggered a chain of events that brought steamboats and economic development to this wild and rugged region. The Colorado River flows through the Grand Canyon on its way to the Gulf of California. Forty-niners taking the southern route to California reached the Colorado River at Yuma Crossing, 120 miles above the river's mouth. To capitalize on the need for transportation, enterprising businessmen made a good profit ferrying the forty-niners across. Then an altercation between ferry operators and Yuma Indians ended in bloodshed, and Fort Yuma was established to protect travelers. However, the remote location of the fort created a logistical nightmare.

Supplying the soldiers overland from San Diego was expensive, and freight charges of over \$500 a ton were not unusual. The Colorado River was shallow and riddled with sand bars, making it challenging for the large paddle-wheelers which plied the oceans and deep rivers. Sternwheelers - steamboats with paddles on the back – were able to pass through areas as shallow as three feet, so enterprising army officers discovered that they could bring supplies by sea to the mouth of the Colorado, then up-river to Yuma, at far lower costs.

An early entrepreneur, Captain George Johnson, found that he could make the trip from the Gulf of California to Yuma and back in four to five days. At \$75 a ton, Johnson saw a gross of around \$4,000 per trip, proving that river trade could be highly profitable. Soon, miners and ranchers were sending cargoes of copper ore, hides and wool downriver. Colorado River steamboats thrived until they were supplanted by the railroads in the late 1800s. This part of the Colorado River was closed to boats by construction of the Laguna Dam in 1908, and the addition of numerous other dams, including the giant Hoover Dam near Las Vegas, would now make steamboat trade impossible.

Source(s):

Muther, Kay. Paddle-wheelers Appeared on the Colorado River in 1852, Wild West. August 2004.

Lingenfelter, Richard E. Steamboats on the Colorado River, 1852-1916. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978.

<http://www.historynet.com/paddle-wheelers-appeared-on-the-colorado-river-in-1852.htm>

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