

## **The Grand Excursion, 2004**

ROCK ISLAND, Ill. (AP) – Craning their necks almost in unison, the crowd leaned forward in eager anticipation as the steam locomotive lumbered around the final curve, belching its thick black smoke.

The first major event of the Grand Excursion 2004, the arrival of old No. 261, had kept hundreds of spectators waiting longer than they had expected under a blinding sun. But after 150 years, who's going to quibble over one more hour?

In the spring of 1854, former President Millard Fillmore led a delegation of 1,200 across Illinois by train to the area that is now the Quad Cities, then up the Mississippi River by paddlewheelers to St. Paul, Minn.

That trip, called the Grand Excursion, was credited with bringing commerce and settlers to the region. It's now being retraced, giving participants a new chance to appreciate America's most famous river and what it has meant to the country.

Ol' Man River hasn't seen the likes of this for 100 years, a flotilla of seven riverboats churning upstream, whistles blaring and calliopes belting out bouncy tunes on the 410-mile trek to the Twin Cities. Dozens of pleasure boats will follow along.

"I've traveled the Rhine, I've traveled the Nile. I've never traveled that far on the Mississippi. I figure it's time I did," said Daniel Schalf of Silvis, Ill., who's working as a waiter on one of the boats, the Celebration Belle out of Moline, Ill.

Well, there eventually will be seven boats. The two largest, the Delta Queen and Mississippi Queen, were hung up downriver because the water was too high for them to squeeze under a railroad bridge at Hannibal, Mo. They hope to catch up with the others later in the journey, which ends July 5 in the Twin Cities.

The five that made it to the Quad Cities helped kick things off by parading up and down a stretch of the river and then offering a variety of breakfast, lunch and dinner cruises. They'll start north on Sunday, taking on passengers for day trips at cities along the way and giving them a glimpse of the past, thanks to volunteers such as Susan Kittinger of St. Paul, Minn.

Kittinger and several other women are serving as hostesses on the boat, wearing the bulging hoop skirts that were all the rage in the mid-1800s and carrying parasols. Most are teachers on their summer vacations.

"Any opportunity to do something exciting, historical and interesting, that's what teachers go for," said Kittinger, who teaches English as a second language. "They said they needed hostesses and we just jumped on it."

Because the original Grand Excursion started with a trip on the first set of railroad tracks to reach the Mississippi, organizers had Milwaukee Road 261 fired up and put into action.

The 460,000-pound coal-burning locomotive with 74-inch drivers is pulling two tenders, 16 vintage cars and two modern Amtrak cars. The configuration also includes two Amtrak diesels to power the electrical systems.

The arrival in Rock Island on a trip carrying 300 passengers from Chicago drew gawkers of all ages. Gordon Nelson, wearing a tie emblazoned with a steam locomotive, lives in Moline but grew up in Chicago, where he and his buddies used to chase the old California Zephyr on their bikes.

At age 2 1/2, Will Rolfstad of Davenport can't ride a bike yet, but he can still appreciate trains. His parents, Erik and Trish Rolfstad, dressed him in striped coveralls and a red kerchief, just like the engineers used to wear.

"Will loves Thomas the Train," Trish Rolfstad said, referring to a series of books and videos popular with toddlers. "That's what he got for Christmas. But this is the real thing."

The train is accompanying the boats up the river, offering excursions along the way.

"This isn't about us," chief engineer Steve Sandberg said, gazing at the crowd. "All these kids, all these elderly kids, seeing this is what makes it all worthwhile."

The idea for the first grand excursion was hatched in the East. The re-creation grew out of a riverfront revitalization project in St. Paul, Minn., that started in 1994. Planners figured it would take about 10 years to finish.

"Then we came to learn of this obscure at the time historic fact of the 1854 Grand Excursion," said Patrick Seeb, president of the Riverfront Corp. in St. Paul. "A city staffer said maybe we want to tie the 10-year plan to the 150th anniversary."

It was like Mickey Rooney saying to Judy Garland, "Let's do show." The St. Paul organizers talked to other river cities about the idea and they, ahem, got on board.

In all, 55 cities in Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota scheduled activities around the excursion. Some will shoot off cannons to welcome the boats. In Bellevue, Iowa, local residents will re-enact the Bellevue War of the 1840s, when vigilantes joined the sheriff to oust a band of crooks, who were set adrift in the river and threatened with hanging if they returned.

At Trempealeau, Wis., Abby Fillmore's horseback ride up a 500-foot bluff overlooking the

town will be re-enacted. The former president's 22-year-old daughter waved to the boats when she reached the top and they signaled back with their whistles.

Tiny Alma, Wis. – two streets wide and a mile long – will stage its own version of a fireboat welcome: the volunteer fire department will shoot jets of water arching over the river. Organizers in the town of 941 expect 500 to 1,000 visitors to watch the boats pass through Lock and Dam No. 4, little more than a stone's throw from the main street.

"You're so close you could be down there chatting with the people on the boats if you wanted to," said Suzanne Haigh, who works in the city clerk's office. "It's kind of awesome, really."

Seeb would say that about the entire event.

"It has realized my dreams and the dreams of many people about the ability of the upper Mississippi community to work together," he said. "As an event, it will be stunning. As a legacy, we've created a foundation for a network of 55 river communities to work together on other big issues and opportunities."