

**Samuel F. Simpson, "Daguerreotyping on the Mississippi," August 1855**

(keywords: Samuel F. Simpson, floating daguerreotype gallery, boat, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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DAGUERREOTYPING ON THE MISSISSIPPI.

*Dear Editor:*—As you expressed a desire that I should give you an account of my experience during the past twelve months, I now retire a few minutes from business for that purpose.

In the first place, I must inform you that my business now, is wholly conducted on the River. I have run two floating galleries down, and am now fitting out another, and expect to start down in a few weeks. This kind of Gallery, I suppose, is rather new to most of your eastern operators; however, it is becoming quite popular in the west. Last year I fitted one up at this city, which I took down as far as Bayou Goula, on the sugar coast, one hundred miles above New Orleans. We have our boats fitted out with every convenience for taking likenesses. In front of all, is the reception room. In our sitting room we have a large side and sky light that enables us to operate in from five to ten seconds in fair weather. The dampness does not affect our operation half so much as a person would imagine that it would on the river. Notwithstanding, we have to guard against it continually. There is something about a Flat-Boat Gallery that savors very much of the romantic; however, it is not half so romantic as convenient. I am almost induced to think that there cannot be a more convenient plan devised for travelling operators than a Floating Gallery. As soon as the boat is landed we are ready for operations, without all that extra trouble that travelling artists usually experience in unpacking and setting up ready for operating. And there is no lack of conveyance; as soon as we are ready to leave, we untie our lines, spring upon deck, catch hold of our oars, and are off for another "port." Besides, we are entirely independent. If business is good, we can remain, if dull we can leave; we are not tied to one particular place. When we are not employed, we can fish or hunt, as best suits our fancy, as the rivers are thronged with ducks and wild geese. While we are floating along, we are not unfrequently amused by the inhabitants along the shore. Their houses, customs, &c., in many places are very peculiar. And, then, there is that universal annoyance that every boatman must endure, of answering the foolish questions that are asked on shore, mostly by the "colored population," such as, "What's yer loadin'?" "What ye got to sell?" or "Where ye gwine to lay to-night; got any whiskey?" and so many other such foolish questions, that you may imagine that persons with an *artistic craft like our Magic No. 3*, would not at all times feel disposed to return them correct, or even satisfactory answers. In this respect, we amused ourselves in proportion to the annoyance.

However, it is not to be wondered at, that they should take us to be traders, there being such a large number of that class of boats on the river. Indeed, there is no kind of

business that does not find its way on the river. There are merchants, grocers, carpenters, cabinet-makers, blacksmiths, tanners, coopers, painters, shoe-makers, wagon-makers, plough-makers, (and I should have said likeness makers), saddlers, jewellers, potters, glass-blowers, doctors, dentists, showmen, ventriloquists, machinists, jugglers, Barnums, black-legs, gamblers, thieves, humbugs, museums, concerts, circuses, menageries, Tom Thumbs and baby shows, “till you can’t rest.” Indeed you could not name any business from the quack doctor to the Bar tender, that is not represented on the western rivers. And the bosom of the “Mighty Father of Waters” may truly be compared to the streets of a great city, where motley crowds from every nation are flocking to find sale for their merchandise, produce and manufactures. A full description of this river, with its trades and traffics, would be very interesting to those unacquainted with it. Those who have never navigated this river can have no conception of its vastness, nor of the amount of trade that is carried on along its shores, and on its surface. In a good stage of water, I suppose, that in regard to depth, velocity, and amount of water that flows down this stream, it is not surpassed in the world.

Last year I left New Albany, on the first of March; stopped at about fifty landings, took something near one thousand likenesses, travelled (by water,) near fourteen hundred miles, arriving, as before stated, upon the sugar coast, where the French language is universally spoken. Here the weather became rather too warm for my northern blood, at a season of the year, (June) bordering so close upon that of the yellow fever, and I did not find it practicable to remain longer; so I boxed up, sold the Boat, (or rather gave it away,) and boarded the fine steamer Belle Sheridan, for home, where I arrived in something less than six days.

Thus ends last year’s experience. As I am on the eve of making a similar “Trip,” if you desire that I should give you an account of all that is interesting, you will please let it be known. In the mean time if there are any points that I have not touched upon, connected with my business,—manner of traveling, &c., that you would like to be enlightened upon, please let me know, and I will give you all the information I can. For the present, I remain yours, &c.,

New Albany, July 18th 1855

SAM. F. SIMPSON.

A little more of the “lay of the land, and the looks of the people,” as daguerreotyped from day to day, would interest.—Ed.

**[End of text.]**

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**EDITOR’S NOTES:**

Additional information regarding Samuel F. Simpson is found in Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers from the Mississippi to the Continental Divide: A Biographical Dictionary, 1839–1865* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005): 549–50.

See also the text, “The Daguerrotype Boat,” in George H. Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi* (Cincinnati: Devol & Haines, 1887): 49–50.<sup>1</sup>

A daguerreotype boat is mentioned in the April 1856 diary entries of Mary E. Bateman. See *Diary, 1856*, in the Mary E. Bateman Diary #47-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.<sup>2</sup>

1. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8870001\\_DEVOL\\_FORTY-YEARS\\_1887.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8870001_DEVOL_FORTY-YEARS_1887.pdf)

2. [http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/b/Bateman,Mary\\_E.html](http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/b/Bateman,Mary_E.html)

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