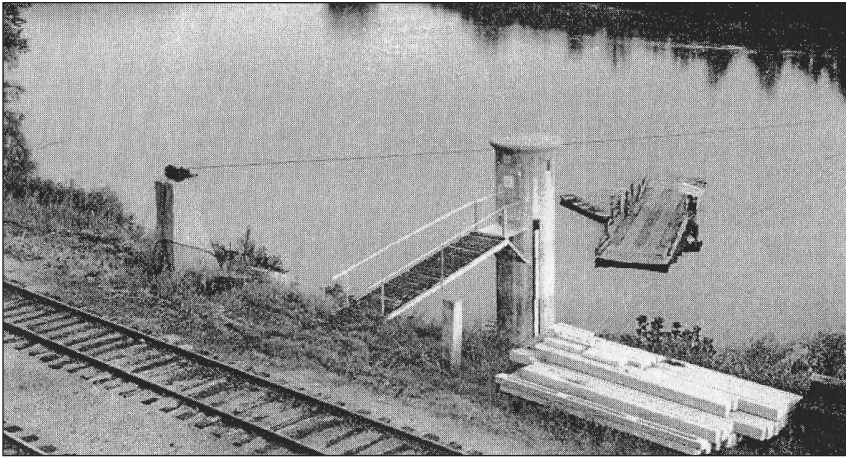


# Ferry Across the White River

By Susan Varno



In 1831, Steamboats chugged up the White River as far as Liberty (now known as Norfolk). They delivered passengers and picked up freight. Men fished in the river. But if someone wanted to cross the river at Calico Rock, there was no bridge. In fact there was no ferry.

The earliest record of a ferry at Calico Rock Landing was in 1870. John Q. Wolfe remembered taking the ferry every day to school. Once, he and two friends fell into the swift current and nearly drowned. Luckily, Bill Bevens came along. He grabbed a long ferry pole and pulled the boys to the landing.

In 1896, IZARD County began licensing ferries. The fee was \$5. Before Frank Aikin and his brother Charles could get a license, they had to post a bond and prove they were “in lawful possession” of the land on both sides of the river. Judge G. S. Rector declared the highest amount the Aikin Brothers could charge to ferry horses and cattle was 10¢, sheep and hogs 5¢, and a wagon with four horses and a driver 75¢.

Messick Gentry wrote,

“Charley would pole the heavy boat two or three hundred yards up the river along the bank on the Calico side. By the time he got across, the boat would have drifted to the landing place opposite Calico Rock.”

At high water, the White River had a powerful current. In low water, the ferry workers had to push long poles through the river bottom to get to the other side.

The best way to move a small ferryboat was with a cable that stretched above the boat from one shore to the other. William Claud Woody operated the ferry. This could be perilous work. High water loosened fallen trees and other debris which crashed against the cable. If a cable broke, the ferry raced downstream until it ran aground on a sandbar or a tree. When the water went down, men and horses dragged the boat back to the landing. Claud’s daughter Lena Woody Hampton said all her brothers had broken arms at one time or another when the windlass (or pulley) “got away” from them.

Tyler Weber had experience working on larger boats. When a cable broke, he was hired to

splice and rewind each cable strand to get the ferry back in use.

These early ferries consisted of flat boards for the deck and a railing for the sides. Animals, wagons, carriages, children, adults, cargo, and sometimes the US Mail were on board. Later, larger ferries transported cars, trucks, and school buses. Though the trips were short, rock bluffs and the original “calico rocks” offered beautiful views to the north. To the south, the winding, rock-strewn river flowed past farm fields that stretched into the mountains.

Over time, the IZARD County ferry had many owners. Most notable was Dr. Noel Copp. He bought the ferry and partnered

with Ben Sanders. Later he worked with his wife Gaye, who was a nurse. From their yard on the White River, they could see the ferry cable.

One winter, the White River was so low the ferry froze in the water some distance from the shoreline. When the weather warmed, the ferry broke loose. It floated among huge chunks of ice almost to Guion. The ferrymen couldn’t return the vessel to Calico Rock until all the ice had passed by.

The last ferry to cross the White River at Calico Rock was in 1967. The Highway 5 Bridge had opened to traffic. Under the bridge, you can still see the concrete pillars that anchored the ferry on both sides of the river.

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