



## **Piloting the River: An Evolution of Dells Boat Tours**

For more than 150 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 that carry thousands of visitors each season.

The first entrepreneur to see the opportunity to bring Dells sightseers closer to this spectacle of nature was lumber rafter Leroy Gates. A colorful character himself, Gates made sure his legacy would be known carving an inscription in the Narrows of the Wisconsin River that reads, "Leroy Gates, Dells and River Pilot, 1849 to 1858" ("Others Before You," 1997). In 1856, Gates took out an ad, declaring he had "purchased a pleasure boat for the purpose of penetrating the numerous occult caves of the dells" ("Others Before You," 1997). Gates' pursuit ushered Wisconsin Dells into an era of tourism that continues today.

Following Gates' lead, throughout the late 1850s and 1860s individual guides took groups of tourists, usually consisting of three to four people, through the Dells in wooden rowboats. These rowboat tours, or on one's own two feet, remained the only way to see the Dells for a number of years.

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.

As the popularity of the scenic boat tours grew, railroad companies began to organize river excursions to the area. In June 1874, the first such group excursion came from nearby Portage, and these "group tours" continued to be an important part of Dells tourist traffic for several more years.

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, then enjoy a leisurely ride back downstream in a rowboat.