

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
A log raft passing a drawbridge on the Mississippi River, 1898

World's Only Female Boat Captain

“I can’t resist the desire to be on the steamer. It is positively fascinating this life and grows upon me.” The words of Ida Moore Lachmund of Clinton were shocking in 1897. She was talking about her life as a river boat captain on the Mississippi River. It wasn’t a typical career for women at the time.

Ida Moore Patterson was born and educated in Philadelphia. She came to Clinton with her dad when he founded the Lyons Female College (later called Our Lady of Angels Seminary). She met her husband, Otto Lachmund, who worked for a local lumber business, C. Lamb & Sons. His work required him to spend time on rafting steamers, and Ida often accompanied him in journeys up and down the river. This sparked her interest in the business of river rafting.

By 1897 Ida had been part owner of several steamboats over ten years: the *Nina*, *Lily Turner*, *Gardie Eastman*, and *Reindeer*. In 1897 she owned and operated the *Robert Dodds*, a steamer that rafted logs on the Mississippi between St. Paul and St. Louis—moving great log rafts “through rapids, under drawbridges, and along tortuous shores” of the great river.

One of Ida's biggest clients was a Clinton lumber company, W.T. Joyce. In fact, the founder, David Joyce, was so impressed with Ida he gave her the name "The Commodore." He contracted with her to handle his log rafting needs and "trusted her fully" to supervise the movement and storage of hundreds of thousands of dollars of logs for his milling operation.

As owner of the *Robert Dodds*, Ida was involved in every aspect of the business. She oversaw her accountant, supervised her steward, and paid the bills. She personally inspected the mechanical equipment, including the boilers, and scheduled needed repairs. All this while overseeing her crew of 21 men.

Ida was popular with her crew. She sometimes donned an apron and invaded the boat's kitchen, pulling together a delicious meal that she invited crew members to share at her table. And when any of the crew was sick, Ida tended them with "care" and "concern."

Ida was known on occasion to take the wheel of her steamer. And her crew said the boat never ran steadier than when it was "under her hand." She maneuvered the boat while pushing a "huge raft of monster logs" of "enormous weight" and "great value." It required guiding the steamboat and raft over sand bars, through eddying currents, in deep and shallow water, between and past abrupt bends in the river—both day and night. It called for a "cool head" and "plenty of nerve."

People in Clinton liked to tell about the time Ida and her crew transported a raft carrying \$80,000 worth of logs from a northern mill to St. Louis without the loss of a single board. It required them to manipulate rapids at Rock Island and work their way through the canal at Keokuk. The owner of the cargo was extremely pleased with the successful completion of the job—and astounded to learn it was all accomplished under the direction of a woman.

Ida wasn't one to waste time. Sometimes as the *Robert Dodds* made its way down the river from the headwaters of northern Minnesota to Clinton, she went ashore and hopped on a train to take a faster mode of transportation to Clinton. It gave her the opportunity to do work in her home office where she wrote up new orders for the next trip. And she could get some housework done. She was well known for her spotless house. It also gave Ida a chance to spend time with her three sons. By the time the *Robert Dodds* reached Clinton, she was ready to rejoin the crew for the remaining journey down river.

She was an accomplished painter and had a kiln in her Clinton house where she painted exquisite China dishes. And she was an excellent musician. On top of all these admirable qualities, Ida's attire was "never out of date" and "never less than appropriate or becoming."

All of these skills earned Ida great praise from people up and down the river as "one of the best examples" of a woman with "energy and pluck." In addition, it was said she demonstrated that a woman could "advance beyond the circles of a dependent" of her husband.

"I love it and am never so happy as when on the decks of the *Robert Dodds*," Ida said. "As the great panorama of nature goes by, when you move along, ever changing, always presenting some new charm, the sound of machinery, the music of the waves against the logs of the raft, all have a charm that enchants one."

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